

IDIOMS AS LINGUISTIC CONVENTION  
(WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM FRENCH AND ENGLISH)

BY

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To my parents

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . . .	iv
ABSTRACT . . . . .	vii
CHAPTER	
I. METHODOLOGICAL PRELIMINARIES AND SCOPE OF STUDY . . . . .	1
1. Methodological Preliminaries . . . . .	1
2. Scope of Study . . . . .	5
II. ON DEFINING IDIOMS . . . . .	7
1. Preliminaries . . . . .	7
2. On Defining Idioms . . . . .	8
2.1 Dictionary Definition . . . . .	9
2.2 Grammatical Definition . . . . .	10
3. Some Characteristics of Idioms . . . . .	16
3.1 Idioms and Metaphors . . . . .	16
3.2 Idioms and the Arbitrariness of the Linguistic Sign . . . . .	18
3.3 Idioms and Speech Acts . . . . .	22
3.4 Idioms and Ambiguity . . . . .	25
3.5 Ill-formed Idioms . . . . .	28
3.6 Idioms and Transformations . . . . .	30
4. Conclusion . . . . .	33
Notes to Chapter II . . . . .	34
III. ANALYSIS . . . . .	35
1. Introduction: The Lexicalist View . . . . .	35
1.1 Katz and Postal (1963) . . . . .	36
1.2 Weinreich (1969) . . . . .	42
1.3 Fraser (1970) . . . . .	44
2. The Generativist View . . . . .	47
2.1 Newmayer (1972) . . . . .	47
2.2 Sadock (1974) . . . . .	50
2.3 Difficulties in Generative Semantics . . . . .	51

	<u>Page</u>
3. Further Problems in General	
Semantics . . . . .	56
3.1 The Grammatical vs. Logico-grammatical Controversy . . . . .	61
3.1.1 The grammatical hypothesis . . . . .	61
3.1.2 The logico-grammatical treatment . . . . .	64
4. Conclusion . . . . .	70
Notes to Chapter III . . . . .	75
IV IDIOMS AND CONVENTIONAL IMPLICATURE . . . . .	76
1. Introduction . . . . .	76
2. The Meaning of Idioms . . . . .	80
2.1 Lexical Metaphors . . . . .	89
2.2 Pragmatic Metaphors . . . . .	93
3. Transformations and Reference . . . . .	99
3.1 Application to Idioms . . . . .	106
3.1.1 Passive . . . . .	108
3.1.2 Pronominalization . . . . .	109
3.1.3 Relative clause formation . . . . .	110
3.1.4 Assertive stress . . . . .	111
3.1.5 Clefting . . . . .	112
4. Conventional Implicature . . . . .	117
4.1 Evidence for Conventional Implicature . . . . .	120
4.2 Conventional Implicature and Fossilization . . . . .	126
5. Consequences for the Theory . . . . .	133
6. Conclusion . . . . .	136
Notes to Chapter IV . . . . .	139
V CONCLUSIONS . . . . .	140
1. Summary of Findings . . . . .	140
2. Remarks . . . . .	142
APPENDIX . . . . .	144
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	146
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH . . . . .	151

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The class of expressions usually referred to as idioms poses a problem for Transformational theory. Generative Grammarians have pointed out that their behavior with respect to transformational rules is unpredictable. Because Generative Grammarians have been mostly concerned with formal operations on syntactic categories, they have attempted to account for the behavior of idioms by means of ad hoc devices like features or transderivational constraints. The present study reviews different stances taken by grammarians and shows that none of the suggested approaches is satisfactory, mostly because researchers have different criteria for classifying expressions as idioms. Idioms are the result of a double operation. The first one is synchronic and bears on reference. The second one is diachronic. The conveyed meaning becomes conventionalized. This conventionalization

of implicature is then shown to be a general principle which operates on other expressions as well, such as idiomatic expressions in Searle's sense. Conventionalization of implicature is dependent upon the speaker's experience of the world. This dependency goes a long way toward explaining why expressions which become conventionalized require a [+human] subject. Apparent counterexamples can be explained in diachronic terms. They are merely reanalyzed by speakers, who reassign referents to parts of idioms. This fact accounts for the double analyzability of some idioms and questions the very notion of derivation.

To achieve descriptive adequacy, linguistic theory must, therefore, provide for speakers' ability to learn bound phrases, to reanalyze structures within those phrases, to assign different referents to some of their elements or to freeze them into fossils. With these modifications, the semantic and formal characteristics of idioms are accounted for.



CHAPTER I  
METHODOLOGICAL PRELIMINARIES  
AND SCOPE OF STUDY

1. Methodological Preliminaries

Definition problems have long puzzled philosophers. It does not seem, however, that linguists have shared this concern to such an extent. This may be one of the reasons why there is far from unanimity as to what an idiom is, although there is an intuition that such a category does represent something. We cannot, therefore, reject the notion altogether: idioms exist and one cannot say that they do not because the notion is established by a lot of evidence and has been around for quite a long time. But this idea in itself does not solve the problem of definition: it is one thing to have an intuitive notion of what a thing is, and another one to make it a clear and coherent category. The aim of linguistics is to describe and explain facts about language and to draw as large a generalization as possible. But in the case of idioms, how are we to achieve this generalization since the category under study suffers precisely from a lack of a clear definition? Furthermore, the very facts under study are supposed to enable us to reach a definition. The whole enterprise runs into the danger of being circular.

These methodological problems were pointed out by Quine (1953): how do we arrive at a definition? We cannot take glosses of lexicographers, since, as empirical scientists, they merely record antecedent facts, i.e., an established relationship of synonymy between the word and its gloss. Definition, for Quine, rests on synonymy, which itself is not established. Another way of defining without having recourse to direct synonymy would be to consider this operation as an explication.

But again, this merely shifts the problem: explaining a word is setting up contexts for the element to be defined which will be synonymous with contexts of the defining elements. When one has recourse to logical or mathematical notations, one still makes use of synonymy: in this case, these symbols or notations are conventionally established for purposes of economy.

Since definitions rest on synonymy, one may ask whether this criterion is a workable one. For Quine, making sense of synonymy presupposes that one has made sense of analyticity. In his reply to Quine, Katz (1964) attempts to give a formal criterion to maintain the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. Synonymy is defined by the fact that words on the left and right of the copula have the same semantic readings. However, this does not really solve the problem: the question remains as to how

one gets these semantic readings. Just as the glosses of lexicographers, these semantic readings are established on empirical grounds, with tests like selectional restrictions. So, in this case, "two statements are synonymous if and only if any experiences which, on certain assumptions about the truth value of other statements, confirm or disconfirm one of the pair, also, on the same assumptions, confirm or disconfirm the other to the same degree" (Grice and Strawson 1956, p. 92).

So, in light of these problems, how can we use a definition without having a circular argument? In the case of idioms, we can make use of what Putnam (1962) calls a "law cluster concept": the intuitive notion of idioms can be shown to englobe a certain number of properties, namely ambiguity, ill-formedness, arbitrariness, distributional particularities and reluctance to transformations. Given these properties, one may ask, then, is a given expression an idiom if it lacks, for example, ambiguity, or ill-formedness, etc.?

An idiom will then be defined as a cluster concept: it does not need to have all the properties to be an idiom, but only a cluster of these properties. The purpose of linguistic description is, then, to give a unified account of these properties by setting up a general principle, i.e., in order to give a coherent explanation of the facts

investigated, such a general principle must be independently motivated by other facts of language, and furthermore must correspond to an intuition about these facts.

The notion of synonymy (or cognitive synonymy) has been used widely by grammarians, and the whole idea of transformations rests on this intuition. Two sentences understood as synonymous and showing a certain degree of similarity must be related transformationally. However, if one pushes the analysis a little further, one runs into problems: it cannot be used as a tool for analysis. As shown by Searle (1974) it is both inadequate and circular. What linguists (both Lexicalists and Generativists) have done is to use paraphrases to infer formal properties of words or sentences: Lexicalists because they do not take into account the use of a sentence, and Generativists because they reject the distinction between syntax and semantics, or more precisely, the autonomy of syntax. This problem will be illustrated in Chapter III.

For Grice and Strawson (1956) synonymy is defined with respect to use. But whereas Quine (1953) rejects the notion of synonymy because it is based on use, Grice and Strawson accept it for this very reason. This apparent contradiction among pragmaticists can be resolved because Grice and Strawson use the notion of intention, a notion that Quine rejects. This notion of intention of speakers will be

shown later (Chapter IV) to be crucial in the formation of idioms.

One way of getting around definition problems would consist in a Gricean treatment of utterances. It can be shown in many cases that the intention of a speaker is crucial in establishing the meaning of an utterance: for example, an ironical sentence is a sentence where a principle of quality has been flouted. It is, moreover, the only satisfying way of accounting for pragmatic influences on the surface form of sentences and keep a distinct level of semantics.

## 2. Scope of Study

This study deals primarily with the class of expressions whose meaning is different from what their surface structure seems to indicate, i.e., expressions which cannot be accounted for within a componential semantic analysis. We investigate how this state of affairs was brought about and show that the various characteristics of these expressions, referred to as idioms, are the result of a conventionalization of derived meanings.

Chapter II is a discussion of the characteristics generally attributed to idioms, such as ambiguity, their relationship to speech acts, their reluctance to undergo numerous transformations and so forth. These characteristics are shown to be insufficient to delimitate a class

of idioms. In Chapter III, the Lexicalist and Generative Semantics accounts are reviewed, and it is shown that their failure to describe idioms in a natural and general way raises some crucial theoretical issues as to the premises of these theories. Chapter IV discusses the different operations, both from a synchronic and a diachronic point of view, by which an expression becomes an idiom. These findings lead us to question the notion of derivation. Chapter V summarizes the study and presents some residual problems.

It is shown in Chapters III and IV that glosses which are used to express the meaning of idioms should not be taken as representing the semantic structure of idioms. We have chosen, nevertheless, to give such glosses for French idioms given as illustrative examples. This choice may seem to contradict our claim. It must be stated clearly, however, that such translations are only given to facilitate the reading of non-native speakers of French, and in no way should be taken as tools for analysis.

## CHAPTER II ON DEFINING IDIOMS

### 1. Preliminaries

In this chapter, we will attempt to define a class of expressions traditionally referred to as idioms. It will be shown that because the notion of idiomaticity is very broadly used, an operational definition is very difficult to present as it is based mostly on intuitive criteria.

The second section will be devoted to a brief survey of different definitions so far proposed by dictionaries and linguists. In Section 3 we will examine the various implications carried by these definitions: in 3.2, the relationship of idioms with the notion of arbitrariness of the linguistic sign; in 3.3, the conditions [for idiomaticity in a speech-act situation; 3.4 and 3.5 will deal with ambiguity and the class of expressions which are less than grammatical; 3.6 focuses on different distributional facts, like paraphrase and cooccurrence properties, as well as the grammatical behavior in terms of transformational potential of idioms.

This chapter is not concerned with an explanation of the facts presented. Our goal is to point out that a

synthesis of the different characteristics of idioms is not possible as they sometimes exclude each other and therefore render very difficult the task of delimiting a homogenous category.

## 2. On Defining Idioms

Among the major problems which continue to present difficulties to linguists is that of idiomaticity. No theory yet proposed has shown itself adequate in dealing with the complexities of the question. Some linguists have even gone so far as to dismiss it altogether, relegating it to the realm of poetry on the ground that by essence it was too elusive and constituted a marginal phenomenon apart from the true nature of language. It seems, however, that this type of process is at the core of human communication and must not only be accounted for in a linguistic (semantic) theory, but by doing so, one can show that the implications of idiomaticity are far-reaching and constitute one of the crucial elements of some general principles of language behavior. Because of this lack of concern, the major problem one faces when dealing with idioms is a terminological one. Throughout the literature, it is impossible to find a consistent approach to the behavior of idioms based on a reasonably clear definition: one usually deals with what one feels to be an idiom. Our first aim, therefore, will be to provide



some kind of criterion by which one can decide what constitutes an idiom, keeping in mind the arbitrary character of any such definition. If it may seem artificial in some cases, it is necessary to classify the analysis by giving it a firm basis.

## 2.1 Dictionary Definition

In traditional grammars, when this problem is not purely and simply ignored (as in Grammaire de l'Académie Française 1937), as in dictionaries, definitions are based on the intuitive notion that idioms represent an anomaly with respect to other forms in language. Under "idiom" we find:

Ce qui est particulier à une langue, au sens du latin *idioma*, et qui est tombé en désuétude.  
(Littré 1873, v. 3, p. 6)

Particularité propre à une langue, idiotisme.  
(Robert 1967, p. 865)

A form of expression, grammatical construction, phrase, etc., peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved by the usage of a language, and often having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one. (OED 1961, v. 5, p. I-21)

There is a unanimous agreement that idioms are a peculiarity of language, but beyond that, there is no real description of what they look like; and their definitions are somewhat vague. Littré gives the Latin translation, although it mentions, but restricts, its relationship to

archaisms. We find the same reference to peculiarity of a phrase in the OED with the observation that the idiomatic meaning is not similar to the grammatical or logical one, without mentioning what a "grammatical signification" could be.

## 2.2 Grammatical Definitions

The classical transformational approach to this phenomenon is still deeply rooted in the structuralist tradition and deals with it in terms of syntactic categories and nodes. Katz and Postal (1963, p. 275) point out that "the full meaning [of an idiom], and more generally the meaning of any sentence containing an idiomatic stretch, is not a compositional function of the meanings of the idiom's elementary grammatical parts." This criterion already roughly mentioned in the OED is similarly used by Fraser (1970) in his definition: "I shall regard an idiom as a constituent or series of constituents for which the semantic interpretation is not a compositional function of the formatives of which it is composed" (p. 83).

These definitions suffer from two major drawbacks; first, they presuppose that there is intuitively a category labeled idiom and that we need only to fill it with what is available in terms of unusual occurrences of stretches; second, and as a consequence of this, they are not restrictive enough as they would permit not only phrases

like "make headway," "to take for (granted)," and the celebrated "to kick the bucket," but all the assertions, questions which can be interpreted as requests, like:

(1) It's cold in here'

(2) Can you take out the cat?

In a certain pragmatic environment described by Gordon and Lakoff (1971) both (1) and (2) can be interpreted as requests and have in this case a semantic interpretation which is not the result of the concatenation of the elements of this sentence. One of the reasons why it is practically impossible to find a clear and adequate definition of idioms among Generative grammarians is that all of these, so far, suffer from one major drawback: they are theory-dependent and are given to account for their behavior within a given model. Not surprisingly, Generative grammar is concerned about the fact that they suffer transformational deficiencies and is therefore mainly interested in these expressions which cannot undergo certain rules, presenting a problem with the productivity potential of the theory. Idioms are defined, then, according to their transformational potential (Fraser 1970). Others (Katz and Postal 1963) try to map their syntactic structure with a meaning which seems arbitrary. Indeed, there is a (near) unanimity among linguists as far as their idiomatic meaning is concerned: the idiomatic

meaning of an expression is not the result of the concatenation of its elements; for example, the meaning of kick the bucket is not the amalgam of the meanings of kick + the + bucket, but something close to the verb die. There is, however, a difference among sentences whose meaning is not arrived at by the concatenation of the meaning of their lexical items; sentences like (1) have a "literal" meaning, as kick the bucket does. But in a speech situation, if the listener, hearing (1), fails to recognize the intention of the speaker (e.g., close the window, turn up the heat, etc.),<sup>1</sup> the utterance is still meaningful; whereas in the case of kick the bucket, the only meaning which can be ascribed to it is the idiomatic one for the speech act to be carried out satisfactorily. Another drawback to this approach is that it leads us into the problems of descriptions: some of these expressions like "pousse au crime" (push to crime), "tord boyau" (wrench gut) (both terms meaning wine), or "oiseau de venus" (dove) show no ambiguity in their interpretation, but are in fact descriptions. They are metaphorical in Morris's terms, as they are used in these instances "to denote an object which they do not literally denote in virtue of their signification, but have some of the properties which their genuine denotata have" (Morris, 1972, p. 65). The relation that these expressions hold to their denotata is different from the relation

between a sentential idiom and its actual meaning. The former is a description of the properties of the object which is denoted, the latter is one specific mapping of a certain semantic interpretation onto a syntactic structure. This problem of mapping has been dealt with to some extent by Weinreich (1969).

In his paper "Problems in the Analysis of Idioms," Weinreich gives the following definition of idioms: "A phraseological unit that has at least two polysemous constituents, and in which there is a reciprocal selection of subsenses, will be called an idiom. Thus some phraseological units are idioms, others are not" (p. 42). For instance, the phrase "red herring" may denote a certain kind of fish the color of blood, or a fish cured with saltpeter and smoked, in which case a subsense of red is selected, or it may mean "phony issue." In this latter case, a subsense "phony" is ascribed to red and a subsense issue is ascribed to herring. In this latter meaning, the selection of subsenses is two-directional and the expression is therefore an idiom, whereas it is not in the previous two cases. Weinreich's formalization of idiom meaning is represented as:

$$\frac{A}{a} + \frac{B}{b} = \frac{A + B}{a + b} \quad \text{literal construction}$$

$$\frac{C}{c} + \frac{D}{d} = \frac{C + D}{x} \neq \frac{C + D}{c + d} \quad \text{idiomatic construction}$$

where  $A + B$ ,  $C + D$  are phonemic sequences, and  $a + b$ ,  $c + d$  ingredient senses, different from the idiomatic sense  $x$ .

Another criterion for idiomaticity put forward by Weinreich (1969) is ambiguity; i.e., do idioms necessarily have literal equivalents? Some of these expressions have unique constituents which do not occur elsewhere in the language: luke in lukewarm, cockles in cockles of the heart, etc. But, according to the definition given above, these expressions are not idioms since the selection of subsenses is not two-directional: luke has only one subsense, as does cockles since they occur only with warm and of the heart. Named "Pseudo-Idioms" (Makkai 1972), they still pose a problem since they have to be marked somehow to specify their restricted environment.

The relationship between idioms and their literal counterpart is viewed essentially as an arbitrary one.

For Weinreich, the relationship between idiomatic and literal meanings of a sentence is too unsystematic to be incorporated in a theory. For him, there is no way of predicting why a sentence like

- (3) Marie est sur les charbons ardents.  
       Marie is on the coals burning

would mean Marie is highly impatient and not that she is in some kind of other, very uncomfortable situation.

Conversely, the same situation could be expressed by some other expression having the same equally painful denotation. However, if it was the case that the relation between a sentence and its idiomatic reading were completely random, this would doom all attempts to understand metaphorical process, and it would not be productive at all. As noted by Sadock (1974), one does not say "in seventh heaven" to mean depressed, or down in the dumps to convey something like elated. It seems therefore that the attribution of an idiomatic reading to an expression is not so unsystematic and that it is possible to draw some general principle governing those facts. Weinreich denounces the unsystematic character of the relationship between literal and idiomatic reading on the grounds that the observation of it can be made only a posteriori. Not only is this not true in the case of metaphors, but his own definition of idioms in terms of selection of subsenses suffers from the same drawback to an even greater extent. Why ascribe the subsenses touchy and subject respectively to hot and potato? There is nothing there which would allow it except the fact that we already know the meaning of the expression hot potato, whereas with metaphors, there are some semantic characteristics shared by both readings.

### 3. Some Characteristics of Idioms

Idioms share a number of characteristics which are always included in definitions.

#### 3.1 Idioms and Metaphors

One may intuitively find it plausible that all of the tournure idioms of the kind mentioned above originated as metaphors. How this happened and what the consequences are will be investigated later, but since the two categories are very closely related and often confused (Fraser 1970; Weinreich 1969), we will examine what characterizes metaphors.<sup>2</sup> This image of language is defined as follows:

Figure de rhétorique, et par extension procédé de langage qui consiste dans un transfert de sens (terme concret dans un contexte abstrait) par substitution analogique. (Robert 1967, p. 1078)

Figure par laquelle la signification naturelle d'un mot est changée en une autre; comparaison abrégée. (Littré 1873, v. 3, p.538)

The figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to that to which it is properly applicable. (OED 1961, v. 6, p. M-384)

Clearly, as a result of these definitions, metaphors share with idioms the "noncompositional function" of their conveyed meaning. An important number of phrases frequently referred to as idioms in the literature fit these definitions: for example, in (3) Marie is in a very uncomfortable situation; charbons ardents has the characteristic of being



very disagreeable (note that it can be substituted by a number of other lexical items displaying the same semantic properties: une fournaise, les épines). The same thing happens with grésiller du trolley, where the subject of grésiller would lead us to believe by his behavior that there are features common to both his behavior and a poorly wired electrical circuit. On the other hand, it is difficult to find any semantic connection between casser sa pipe and the fact of dying; there probably was one at an early stage of the language, but it is lost by now so that it is impossible to substitute any lexical item displaying the same properties while preserving the idiomatic meaning:

- (4a) \*Marie a cassé son cigare/son tuyau/  
 Marie broke her cigar/her pipe/  
 sa bruyère/son fourneau  
 her briar /her stove
- (4b) avaler une couleuvre, rompre la glace  
 to swallow a snake break the ice
- (4c) prendre la parole, rendre l'âme  
 to take the word to give back the soul

It has been pointed out that no semantic interpretation can be attached to any single constituent within an idiom (Fraser 1970), but this is not necessarily true, as shown by avalier une couleuvre, rompre la glace, prendre la parole, rendre l'âme. Since there is no total overlap between idioms and metaphors, idioms cannot be defined only in terms of metaphorical process. The question of motivation of elements within idioms is not solved.

### 3.2 Idioms and the Arbitrariness of the Linguistic Sign

All the definitions have at least one common denominator: the peculiarity of idioms. But this notion immediately raises embarrassing questions: peculiar with respect to what? We can say that, as Litttré does, an idiom is peculiar to a particular language; but then we are faced with a problem: every morpheme, lexical item and every syntactic construction which is not translatable word for word from one language to another constitutes an idiom; for instance, the English possession marker 's is an idiom since it is peculiar to that language. Moreover, in this respect, even expressions traditionally regarded as idioms can be questioned as far as their idiomatic status is concerned. As illustration, an expression in French would not be an idiom in English, which happens to have exactly the same expression, but would be with respect to Arabic which does not:

English	French	Arabic
(5) in seventh heaven	au septième ciel	*
(6) kill the goose that lays the golden egg	tuer la poule aux oeufs d'or	*

There would even be a hierarchy of idiomaticity from French to English, (6) being "more" idiomatic than (5). It is of little help to say that both French and English draw these expressions from a common Greco-Latin cultural background

which was not available to the Arabic language. We are then left with a definition containing an unstable criterion which has to be revised with practically each expression and each language we encounter. It has therefore no value on deciding on the idiomatic status of a phrase.

A more important drawback in this approach is that every lexical item fits the above description, since the vast majority of them are peculiar to a given language. We may recall Fraser's (1970) definition: it is impossible to discover the meaning of an idiom by looking at its surface structure, which implies that they are arbitrary in nature. This view is akin to Saussure's concept of the linguistic sign as being composed of two distinctive parts: a string of sounds, or signifiant, and a concept or idea attached to it, the signifié. For Saussure, there is nothing to motivate the relationship between these two parts. But, if idioms are arbitrary in nature, as signs are according to this theory, then we do not use a category labeled idiom which merely reduplicates another concept. As one cannot deduce the meaning of a word by the combination of morphemes it shows, in the same way the meaning of an idiom cannot be gathered from the amalgam of its lexical items: "clearly every word in the lexicon of a language meets the above definition" (Fraser 1970, p. 22). Although this

type of neutralization of the notions of sign and idiom is intuitively wrong, there seems to be something to it.

Consider what Makkai (1972) has labeled "idioms of encoding": the meanings of English verbs like look for/up/after are more than just the sum of meanings of to look and some other postposition:

- (7) John looked up their address in the  
phone book.
- (8) John looked up when the two planes  
collided.

But those two English verbs are translated as two different verbs in French, totally unrelated morphologically, namely chercher/trouver and regarder. It is inadmissible to claim that the verbs in (7) and (8) share the bulk of their semantic features without giving these features an independent motivation. They offer in fact the only way of encoding a concept and can be stored in the lexicon as different entries, since they do not have the same distribution: in (7) look up takes a direct object whereas in (8) it is intransitive.

This reasoning leads in turn to another problem: we are now led to explain in terms of language specificity what appears to be a very general phenomenon: all languages have means to express things idiomatically. But there is obviously more to idioms than mere arbitrariness.

In the search for motivation of idioms, basing conclusions on etymology poses a particularly difficult problem. Some of the wildest suggestions have been made while attempting to "explain" the meaning of an idiom. It is usually done by setting up a charming story which makes use of what could be called simultaneity in a situation. It goes as follows: in a given social context, the situation x arises. At the same time, an event y totally unrelated, but available, to the social group happens; then the expression of y will be an idiom which means x. For example:

[John is at a party and is surprised by Paul whom he has been avoiding for six months because he owes him a large sum of money; John blushes, and is obviously very embarrassed.]

[At the same time a truck blows its horn in the nearby street.]

According to this scheme, the phrase "the truck honked" will become an idiom meaning something like x is very embarrassed.

It is conceivable that if this situation occurred often enough within a certain group, an idiom could arise. However, it is very unlikely that the creation of an idiom would happen overnight, by accident. There must be a correlation other than eventual between the utterance and the situation, whether it is one of implication, or one characterized by the expression of the semantic field of the lexical items contained in it.

### 3.3 Idioms and Speech Acts

Although parts of idioms can show some of the semantic properties of their literal counterparts to a variable degree, a characteristic of elements within idioms is that they have no referent, or more precisely, they have a certain way of referring. Consider:

- (3) Marie est sur les charbons ardents.
- (9) Paul grésille du trolley.  
Paul is sizzling from the trolley-pole
- (10) Marie a cassé sa pipe.

For an idiom to be decoded as such, the literal interpretation must be ignored, the context must give indications that the literal reading would be incongruous or absurd; it is a fact that in a speech situation, if the hearer fails to understand (10) as an idiom, he does not fall back on the literal reading; the speaker assumes that there is no object in the world to which either charbons ardents in (3) or trolley in (9) refer, and that the hearer is aware of this fact, a condition which in turn will allow the listener to recognize the speaker's intention. If the listener fails to assume that there is no referent, the sentence will have its literal interpretation (if one is available), or there will not be any communication. The listener may enquire further as to what the speaker meant. For (10) to be understood idiomatically,

the speaker must share with the listener the belief that the attribution of a pipe to Marie is irrelevant, and further that she has not been seen around for awhile, so that it can be reasonably expected that it is the case that she is dead.

There is, however, an obvious difference between (3) and (9) on one hand and (10) on the other hand. Whereas some rules of inference may allow a hearer of (13) and (9) to recognize the intention of the speaker to speak "idiomatically," rules which would be of the same type as suggested for metaphors never heard before, there cannot be such rules for (10). Even if the listener perceives that there is a certain intention present on the part of the speaker, there is nothing in (10) which would convey the meaning "to die" rather than anything else. In this latter case, the listener must know the idiom and recognize it as such. There seem to be more to idioms than just the compositional function characteristic. A sentence like

(1) It's cold in here!

can be used idiomatically without being an idiom. This presupposes a certain stabilization of the phrase: "Could you close the window?" may be used idiomatically as a request, but "are you able to close the window?" is not.

It may be the case that questions or statements can be used as requests and end up as idioms at a later stage in the language, i.e., become partially or totally fossilized. Similar examples of such switches, where requests or questions have become nouns can be found in French; consider

- (11) C'est une Marie couche - toi - là.  
It is a Marie lay down yourself here  
(She is a slut.)
- (12) Suzanne et Berthe sont des Marie-  
Suzanne and Bertha are Marie  
  
couche - toi - là.  
lay down yourself here
- (13) \*Suzanne et Berthe sont des Marie  
Suzanne and Bertha are Marie  
  
couchez - vous - là.  
lay down yourselves here
- (14) Paul est un m'as- tu vu  
Paul is a me have you seen  
(Paul is a bragger.)
- (15) Patrick et Bernard sont des m'as-  
Patrick and Bernard are me have  
  
tu-vu.  
you seen
- (16) \*Patrick et Bernard sont des nous avez-  
Patrick and Bernard are us have  
  
vous-vu.  
you seen

In (11), a request has become a noun, and (12) shows that it is fossilized. The subject of (12) is plural, so one would expect that Marie and toi would pluralize, but they



do not (Cf. 13). The same phenomenon, where a question becomes a noun, is illustrated in (14) and (15). Again, the clitic m' does not agree with the plural subject (16) nor does it change from first person to third.

The possibility for a speech act to be understood differently from its surface structure because of its possible entailment is not a sufficient criterion for idiomatic status. A necessary condition would be that it has only one possible entailment because of some stabilization occurring in its decoding. The switch question/request or statement/request is too universally distributed.

### 3.4 Idioms and Ambiguity

One can distinguish between two types of ambiguity: structural ambiguity exemplified by sentences like

(17) Flying planes can be dangerous.

which is the surface realization of two underlying syntactic structures (namely: to fly planes can be dangerous or planes which are flying, in contrast with planes at rest, can be dangerous) and lexical ambiguity as in

(18) Mary went to the bank.

where the two readings of (18) depend on the meaning of the word bank (i.e., financial institution or bank of the river) (see Katz and Fodor 1963). Ambiguity has been put forth (Weinreich 1969; Makkai 1972) as a characteristic of "true idioms." Here they are referring to lexical ambiguity. \*By

their definition, spic and span, kith and kin are not "true idioms," since in the first one, neither constituent is free and in the second one, one constituent (kin) is free.

Some of these idioms are ambiguous only by some linguistic accident, through homophonic substitution:

- (19a) Paul se met sur son trente-et-un.  
Paul puts himself on his thirty-one  
(Paul dresses up.)
- (19b) se mettre sur ← mettre sur soi
- (19c) tomber dans le lac  
to fall in the lake  
(to fall in a trap)
- (19d) être en nage (←age ←agua)

Examples (19) result from three changes. The first change is from se mettre sur to mettre sur soi (still present in a variant like se mettre sur ses plus beaux atours):<sup>4</sup>

- (20) Paul s'est mis sur une chaise longue.  
Paul put himself on a lounge-chair
- (21) Paul s'est mis sur ses plus beaux  
Paul put himself on his most beautiful  
atours.  
dresses (archaic)

In (20), the reflexive pronoun se is the object (patient) of mettre, and sur une chaise longue is a locative, whereas in (21), sur ses plus beaux atours is the object of mettre, and se the locative. The second change is the substitution of trente-et-un not as a number, but substituted to trentain (a type of expensive

cloth) which became \*trente un by homophonic substitution; the third change is a case of hypercorrection of: trente un was changed into trente-et-un. This is not an isolated phenomenon: tomber dans le lac (←lacet), être en nage (←age←agua). In every case, the meaning of the lexical item which was substituted was lost and the speakers took up the closest expression they could find having the same phonetic shape. According to Weinreich (1969), (19) would be an idiom, but not (21), since atours is not free and can only occur in this context. It seems unreasonable to claim idiomatic status for one and not for the other, since they both fit the componential function criterion. One way of saving the ambiguity criterion would be to claim that (19) and (21) are, in fact, two idioms: se mettre sur, and trente-et-un/ses plus beaux atours. The first one would be structurally ambiguous, trente-et-un lexically ambiguous, and ses plus beaux atours nonambiguous. But this is not what Weinreich means when he talks about the ambiguity, apart from the fact that it would be the only case of idiom with structural ambiguity. In this case, the description in terms of subsenses would have to be considerably broadened to include grammatical features. One could argue that in giving a synchronic description of a language, one should not be concerned about the deviational history of some lexical item; but, as it will be shown later, the semantic

characteristics of the expressions from which idioms have arisen can account for some peculiarities of their behavior. The principle governing this type of operation must, therefore, be incorporated into the linguistic theory if one wishes to achieve descriptive adequacy.

### 3.5 Ill-formed Idioms

An important number of tournure idioms in French are less than grammatical. A few examples are:

- (22) battre la campagne  
to beat the countryside  
(to be spaced out)

tourner casaque  
to turn cassock  
(to go back in front of someone)

faire chou blanc  
to do cabbage white  
(to fail)

être sous la coupe de quelqu'un  
(to be under the influence of somebody)

croquer le marmot  
(to wait)

savoir sur le bout du doigt  
to know on the tip of the finger  
(to know perfectly)

à l'article de la mort  
at the article of the death  
(to be near death)

être en nage  
(to be sweating)

avoir maille à partir avec quelqu'un  
(to have trouble with somebody)

de quoi quelqu'un retourne  
(what is someone up to)

Some of these expressions violate selectional restrictions, like avoir une maille à partir ← \*[partir une maille] where the verb partir in this occurrence takes a direct object, or de quoi (x) retourne, where retourner should require a direct object. Some others show a violation of semantic features, like battre la campagne, where battre requires a direct object either [+ human], or at least of a reasonable size. Yet no speaker feels any violation. This is intuitively sound, because why should a language generate any ill-formed sentence without being rejected by a linguistic community?

These expressions seem ill-formed for the same reason some are ambiguous (3.4): they contain archaisms. For instance, partir in avoir une maille à partir occurs only in the infinitive. The fact that it takes a direct object in this expression is not a violation of selectional restriction; it is here a relic of Latin partire, "to separate," and not partir (to go away, to leave). All the other cases of putative violations, whether semantic or syntactic, can be shown to be archaisms. They should, therefore, not be treated as same verbs, but as different dictionary entries having a highly restricted possible environment, as some other nondefective verbs which can only take a very limited class of objects, like désamorcer (une bombe, un complot).

### 3.6 Idioms and Transformations

The reason why idioms present a problem for Generative theory is that they fail to undergo transformations without losing their idiomaticity, or that a transformation regarded as optional because of independent evidence must apply:

- (23) Paul kicked the bucket.
- (24) Paul a essuyé les plâtres.  
Paul wiped out the plaster  
(Paul was the first to try out something.)
- (25) \*The bucket was kicked by Paul.
- (26) \*Les plâtres ont été essuyés par Paul.

While (23) and (24) are ambiguous between a literal reading and an idiomatic one, (25) and (26) have only the former one. Generative theory is designed as a fully productive system and has no provision for sentences which, although a particular structural description for a given transformation is met, cannot undergo these transformations.

Therefore, idioms could be defined in terms of their transformational potential: expressions reluctant to undergo transformations would be labeled as idioms. This is essentially Fraser's (1970) proposal, although he does not test idioms with respect to specific transformations, but in terms of operations which can be carried out on a particular idiom. These operations are represented in the following levels, symbolizing a frozenness hierarchy:

- $L_0$  = no operation possible, the idiom is totally frozen
- $L_1$  = adjunction of some nonidiomatic constituent to the idiom, as the 's and -ing in "John's kicking the bucket"
- $L_2$  = insertion of some constituent into the idiom, as the class in "John read the class the riot act"
- $L_3$  = permutation of some elements within an idiom: "Lay down the law," "lay the law down"
- $L_4$  = extraction, as illustrated in PASSIVE, where the direct object is extracted from the idiom into subject position, viz., the buck in "the buck has been passed to often around here"
- $L_5$  = reconstruction, where the syntactic function of the idiom has been altered; this can be seen in the action nominalization transformation, where the verb functions as a noun:

He laid down the law on his daughter.

His laying down of the law to his daughter

$L_6$  = unrestricted: any operation can apply

Fraser (1970) claims that although there may be great idiolect variations, this type of hierarchy should hold: if an idiom listed as belonging to level 5 is actually perceived as belonging to  $L_3$  for a given speaker, it should not for this same speaker undergo operations of  $L_4$ .

According to Fraser, there are no idioms listed under  $L_6$  since this level presupposes operations such as topicalization or pronominalization. This is obviously too strong, as

shown by Quang (1971). Moreover, some idioms like "poser un lapin" (to stand someone up) which does not passivize and therefore belongs to level 4 can undergo clefting:

- (27) C'est un sacré lapin qu'il lui a posé!  
(Did he stand her up!)

A number of idioms can undergo PRO, provided there is a reference either linguistically expressed or pragmatically present:

- (28) Il lui en a posé un, de lapin!  
(29) Paul en tient une! (de couche, de cuite)  
(Paul is especially stupid, especially drunk.)

An intriguing fact is worth noticing: idioms included within the least restricted class ( $L_5$ ) can be decoded by a listener with the help of rules of inference discussed above. This class happens to contain a number of expressions which are not peculiar to English. They have almost word for word equivalents in French:

- (30a) jeter des perles aux cochons  
cast pearls before swine  
(30b) tenir (sa) parole  
keep one's word  
(30c) tirer les ficelles  
pull some strings

A possible explanation for this fact is that they are in fact stabilized metaphors which have not undergone fossilization (a detailed account will be given in Chapter IV). Their transformational potential appears to be linked with



their semantic specialization. According to this criterion, expressions which do not undergo any transformation would be idioms, like "vive la liberté." But this reluctance to transformations is not restricted to idioms; for instance, it has been shown that, contrarily to Chomsky's analysis (1972), some Adjective + Noun compounds cannot be derived from Noun + copula + Adjective: A good friend, \*the friend is good; the late Lyndon Johnson, \*Lyndon Johnson is late.

#### 4. Conclusion

It appears from the facts presented in this chapter that attempting to define idioms, one is likely to be in a circular operation. A mere combination of all these factors is not satisfactory as it would fail to restrict the class under study. The facts presented in Sections 3.4, 3.5, and 3.6 suggest that idioms are the result of an ongoing process and that the analysis cannot be restricted to these forms which have now undergone total fossilization. It has been shown that the various criteria put forth to decide on idiomatic status of an expression are not satisfactory, since there is no systematic correspondence among them.

In the next chapter we will examine the various possible analyses so far suggested.

Notes to Chapter II

<sup>1</sup>See Searle (1975) for a detailed discussion of the various steps involved in the decoding of speech act.

<sup>2</sup>The term metaphor is used very loosely by most Transformational grammarians and is very often confused with metonymy, since from a purely formal point of view, both seem to behave in the same fashion. The facts noted by Borkin (1972), however, suggest that they might be differentiated, even on formal grounds.

<sup>3</sup>It is quite possible that pipe, in the French idiom casser sa pipe, has nothing to do with the smoking device but is originally related to "artery." This would make this idiom an archaic one and explain why it does not undergo transformations (see Chapter IV, Section 3.1).

<sup>4</sup>For a detailed discussion of patient subject construction, see Van Oosten (1977).

## CHAPTER III ANALYSIS

### 1. Introduction: The Lexicalist View

We will now turn to some of the attempts of transformational grammarians to deal with the facts described in Chapter II.

One can distinguish two major trends: the Lexicalist approach, as illustrated by the works of Katz and Postal (1963), Weinreich (1969), and Fraser (1970), and the Generativist view, illustrated by Newmayer (1972) and Sadock (1974). Post-Chomsky linguistics has been mostly concerned with finding regularity in the production of sentences, and accounting for facts of language with fully productive devices. In this respect, idiomatic expressions present a stumbling block for the transformational theory, mostly because they are only semi-productive in the sense that not all transformations can apply to all idioms and they show a great deal of irregularity. The transformational potential of a given expression is unpredictable, as we have seen above, because, although expressions meet the structural description of rules thought to be otherwise freely applicable, they cannot undergo these rules without losing their idiomaticity.

The Lexicalist approach is based mostly on Chomsky (1965) and Katz (1967a). It does not try to account for idiomaticity within the syntactic part of the grammar, but assumes that all relevant semantic information can be found in the lexicon. The semantically based grammar of the Generativists, on the other hand, following suggestions by Lakoff (1970c) and McCawley (1968) rejects the notion of interpretive rules and attempts to handle these facts with logical and transderivational constraints.

In this chapter, we will investigate the different treatments and motivate our decision to choose one approach, i.e., a logico-grammatical treatment on the grounds that it is the only one which cannot only account in a satisfactory manner for the phenomena presented, but can as well incorporate other characteristics of idiomatic sentences with respect to judgments of grammaticality.

### 1.1 Katz and Postal (1963)

The first significant contribution to the study of idiomaticity within a Generative framework is a paper by Katz and Postal entitled "Semantic Interpretation of Idioms and Sentences Containing Them." They distinguish between two types of idioms: the first type, "syntactically dominated by one of the lowest level syntactic categories, i.e., noun, verb, adjective, etc. . . .," are "lexical idioms." Under this category fall compounds of two or more morphemes,

like tele+phone, bari+tone. In the second type are "those whose syntactic structure is such that no single lowest level syntactic category dominates them;" they are called "phrase idioms," like kick the bucket. This distinction is necessary because if one were to treat "kick the bucket" as a lexical entry, e.g., intransitive verb meaning to die, it would greatly complicate the grammar: the syntactic component would have to generate both the idiom and each element of that idiom, each as lexical entries. Furthermore, rules within the phonological component would have to be reduplicated for the literal sentence and the "phrase idiom" since in most cases, although they have the same phonetic make up, the difficulty represented by the fact that the meaning of a "phrase idiom" cannot be supplied by its components (in this instance, die is not the result of concatenation of the meanings of kick + the + bucket) is gotten around by assigning the reading of the phrase idiom to the constituent which dominates the entire idiom. Then, as Katz and Postal (1963, p. 278) put it:

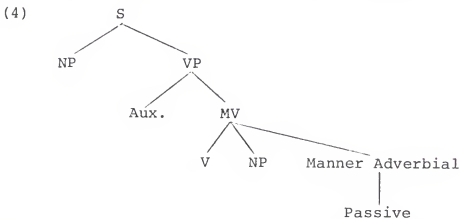
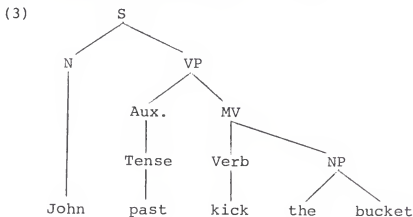
. . . once readings have been supplied for all idioms in a sentence, the projection rules of semantic theory operate in the normal fashion, amalgaming readings<sup>1</sup> [emphasis supplied] drawn from sets of readings associated with constituents to form derived readings to be assigned to the constituent dominating them.

The fact that "kick the bucket" cannot be passivized without losing its idiomatic reading is handled by the adjunction

of a "manner adverbial passive" node to the constituent dominating the phrase idiom. In the case of the idiomatic sentence, the constituent MV dominates the string "kick - the-bucket," whereas in the case of the literal phrase, it dominates "kick-the-bucket-Passive":

(1) John kicked the bucket.

(2) The bucket was kicked by John.



The ambiguous sentence (1) can be understood as idiomatic or literal, and its underlying structure is (3); sentence (2) has only the latter reading, and is thus represented as (4) where the constituent MV does not dominate the

dictionary entry for the idiom kick-the-bucket, but the entire stretch kick + the + bucket + Passive. This device was proposed by Chomsky (1965) to draw a generalization from the fact that, according to his claim, verbs which do not passivize do not take manner adverbials freely. Therefore, Passive is given as an optional constituent of manner. However, as shown by Lakoff (1970a) this is not so: stative verbs like know, consider, think, etc., do not take manner adverbials, but they do passivize:

- (5) Everyone knew that Bill was tall.
- (6) \*Everyone knew cleverly that Bill was tall.
- (7) Pass.: That Bill was tall was known by everyone.

Therefore, if we want to save Chomsky's analysis, we must introduce Passive somewhere else besides with manner. This reduplication causes a lack of generality undesirable for the grammar.

Conversely, this analysis cannot predict that verbs like owe, resemble, etc., do not undergo Passive, although manner adverbials can occur freely with them:

- (8a) John strikingly resembles Haj.
- (8b) \*Haj is strikingly resembled by John.

So, in the case of know, consider, the Passive morpheme should be introduced apart from manner, and in the case of resemble, owe, the lexicon would have to indicate that the verbs do not passivize; Chomsky's analysis cannot

account for these facts. But, more important, and even considering the state of affairs of Generative Grammar in 1963, the idea of assigning the reading of an idiom to a higher node is inconsistent with the notion that lexical items should replace only constituents since all relevant semantic information can be found in the lexicon. This notion is central in early Transformational Grammar. The "amalgam" as formulated by Katz and Fodor (1963) has the effect of destroying the individual readings as it proceeds from bottom up: it is then impossible to deal with idioms which contain variables, like bring (x) to light. Moreover, if the entry for a phrase idiom is dominated by a superior constituent, phonological and transformational rules (whenever possible) cannot apply.

This position inevitably leads Katz and Postal to posit in the dictionary the existence of a phrase idiom component. This component would be the only device capable of handling idioms which are not syntactically well formed, since rules of grammar could not generate these idioms whose structural description does not match the output of a well-formed derivation.

It would be tempting to consider that items making up idioms constitute lexical exceptions: Lakoff (1970a) has shown that some rules of grammar are governed, i.e., they permit lexical exceptions. For instance, some verbs do not undergo Passive:



(9) John resembles Mary's mother.

(10) \*Mary's mother is resembled by John.

The verb is said to govern the transformation: it is central to the operation of the rule. (Some verbs, like owe, have, possess, want, weigh are exceptions to Passive; others are exceptions to Question Formation [beware].) Nouns in English are said to govern the rule that places plural endings on nouns (in this case, too, there might be exceptions: child, sheep, ox). One could, therefore, represent an idiom which does not undergo, say, Passive, as being somewhat governed by the verbs, if we posit an idiom as a single entry. But, except for Passive, it does not seem that there is enough independent evidence for exceptions to rules to make room for the notion of government in the case of idioms; Imp., Neg. placement are supposed to be un-governed, although numerous idioms do not undergo them:

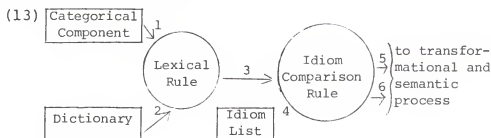
(11) \*Casse ta pipe!  
 "Break your pipe."  
 (Die!)

(12) ?Paul n'a pas pris son pied.  
 "Paul did not take his foot."  
 (Paul did not enjoy himself.)

The major flaw in Katz and Postal's treatment of idioms is that it is based entirely on one expression, namely kick-the-bucket, and there is no mention of expressions suffering from categorial defects, like noun+noun compounds

## 1.2 Weinreich (1969)

Weinreich investigates two possibilities in treating idioms:<sup>2</sup> the unit treatment and the non-unit treatment. To get around some of the difficulties Katz and Postal's (1963) analysis leads into, Weinreich proposes to add to the dictionary an idiom list; the entry for each idiom in this list contains a specification of its transformational properties; then, an "idiom comparison rule . . . operates on a terminal string before it has entered the transformational component or the semantic process. The idiom comparison rule matches a terminal string against the idiom list" (Weinreich 1969, p. 58).

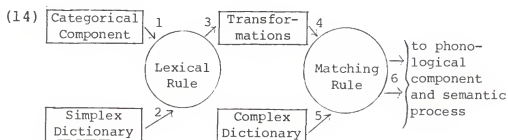


Explanation:

1. Preterminal strings
2. Dictionary entry
3. Terminal strings
4. Idioms
5. Literal terminal strings
6. Idiomatic terminal strings

This analysis accounts for some of the facts overlooked by Katz and Postal (1963), namely the structural regularity of idioms, the fact that they may contain variables. The "idiom comparison rule" actually generates idioms (how this operation was brought about is unspecified in Katz .

and Postal) from the idiom list which contains only constructions of two or more constituents which are polysemous and where the selection of subsenses is two-directional (for Weinreich's definition of an idiom cf. Chapter II); others will be generated directly in the dictionary. The representation in (13) is further modified to account for what Weinreich calls the degree of familiarity of expressions:



Explanation:

1. Preterminal strings
2. Morphemes, unanalyzable
3. Terminal strings
4. Derived marker
5. Familiarity ratings for analyzable complex words and clichés; idiomatic senses
6. Literal and idiomatic strings with familiarity ratings

The simplex dictionary contains all ungenerable structures like single morphemes and complexes of unique structures. The complex dictionary contains all compounds, complex words, idioms and sentences familiar to speakers of a given language. The matching process occurs after the transformational processing, and would thus provide a unified treatment for both idioms and familiar phrases, which are

very often idiomatic. Idioms which are ill-formed in terms of categorial defects: expressions like eke out or cave in would be stored in the simplex dictionary without semantic features, and their given sense descriptions from the idiom list or complex dictionary by the matching rule. The question of how this matching rule works, i.e., how it matches one part of an idiom with one part of its meaning is left open.

Weinreich's treatment seems exceedingly complex to the point of being nebulous.<sup>3</sup> His approach cannot be tested with specific idioms, and the mechanisms involved in such a description violate principles of simplicity. It is furthermore difficult to motivate the different devices this description calls for on independent grounds.

### 1.3 Fraser (1970)

Following the works of Katz and Postal (1963) and Weinreich (1969) before him, Fraser gives basically the same definition of idioms and expands it to include every word in the lexicon of a language, confusing, in my opinion, idiomaticity and arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. He also distinguishes between "lexical idioms" and "phrase idioms."

His goal is to find a way of representing the meaning of an idiom in the deep structure representation of a sentence, and to account for a phenomenon noticed earlier

by Weinreich, i.e., the recalcitrance of idioms to undergo particular syntactic transformation. He does not purport, however, to attempt to account within the syntactic part of the grammar for the origin of an idiom, or predict some or all of its meaning. According to Fraser, then, monomorpheme idioms, lexical idioms, and phrasal idioms can all be treated in a similar way. Each lexical entry is seen as constituted by a set of insertion restrictions symbolized by  $\langle \rangle$ , a complex symbol containing a set of syntactic features  $[ ]$  and a set of semantic markers  $\{ \}$ . Thus, an idiom like "hit the sack" would be represented by something like: ( $\langle \frac{+human}{Adv.} \rangle [hit][the][sack] \{go\ to\ bed\}$ ) where the features +human-and—Adv. in the set of insertion restrictions would represent the fact that an animate (human?) subject is required and that the idiom can occur with time adverbials like "at 5 p.m." or "early."

Given this representation, the restrictions are tested against a particular environment. If this test is successful, then the complex symbol associated with the lexical entry is tested to determine whether it is compatible with the complex symbol associated with that environment. Finally, the complex symbol of the lexical item is combined with the constituent-dominated complex symbol provided that "(1) the resulting complex symbol is a set-union of the two original complex symbols, (2) the

insertion restrictions formerly associated with the lexical items are deleted, and (3) the semantic markers associated with the lexical entry are now associated with the dominating grammatical constituent." The consequence of this approach is that the notion of lexical entry is considerably extended, and it amounts to treating idioms as units with all the problems inherent to this solution: no semantic information is associated with individual parts of the idiom, but an entire set of markers are associated with the entire idiom. As in Katz and Postal (1963), this represents a violation of the principle that lexical items replace only constituents. Although the mechanism is faulty within this theory, the observation that it is impossible to attribute a definite meaning to parts of an idiom is crucial to the understanding of idiomatic process as we will see in Chapter IV. Semantic information associated sometimes at a later stage with parts of an idiom play an important role in the derivation of such sentences. All these explanations have in common the notion that the meaning of a sentence must be reached through the lexicon.

One possible argument against Fraser's notion is that because his solution predicts that hit-the-sack is a lexical entry, then no lexical item should be replaceable inside the idiom. Yet we know that hit-the-hay has

the same meaning but hit-the-sheet does not. Therefore, the notion that an idiom is a lexical entry is self-defeating. One can hardly imagine a grammar where lexical entries would be self-generating (embeddable). The Lexicalist approach, then, is unable to account for the facts presented, since it cannot be independently motivated.

## 2. The Generativist View

In this hypothesis, syntax is not viewed as an autonomous component. Generative Semantics is based on the assumption that formal properties mirror meaning. Lakoff (1970c) has presented evidence that there must be some rules that apply not only to individual derivations, but to classes of derivations. These rules, on transderivational constraints, are required since there are cases where the well-formedness of a derivation depends on certain properties of other, related derivations.

### 2.1 Newmayer (1972)

Newmayer argues for a non-unit treatment, i.e., instead of having idioms listed in the dictionary as P-markers composed of lexical items having entries distinct from those which occur in nonidiomatic sentences, all non-anaphoric insertion occurs at the level of shallow structure. Newmayer rejects the unit treatment because:

- (1) it violates the condition that lexical items should

replace only constituents. As seen above, Katz and Postal (1963) cannot account for idioms like pull one's leg, bring something to light which contain variables (one, something). Moreover, some idioms do not replace constituents: beat around the bush replaces a verb and a direct object, avoid discussion. We will see later to what extent this latter argument is valid (cf. Section 2). (2) Idioms usually have well-formed literal equivalents. (3) Idioms which range over two S nodes and which can undergo certain rules in the lower S pose a problem:

(15a) Don't count your chickens before  
they hatch.

(15b) Don't count your chickens before  
they're hatched.

(15a) and (15b) would be listed as two different idioms in the dictionary if they were treated as unit. (4) The unit treatment cannot account for the fact that verbs have the same morphology in idioms as in literal sentences. For example, the past tense of the boys shoot the breeze is not \*the boys shoot the breezed or \*the boys shoot the breeze, but the boys shot the breeze. The unit treatment has no way of predicting this phenomenon without a good deal of reduplication of rules.

Therefore, Newmayer (1972, p. 296) proposes the following addition to linguistic theory:

The grammar of every language contains a list of ordered pairs of semantic representations ( $M_1$  and .



$M_2$ ). Each pair on this list is an idiom source. The list is an idiom inventory. Furthermore, any item in the lexicon may be marked with the designation of one or more idiom sources. The idiom inventory acts as a set of transderivational constraints and as a set of conditions on lexical insertion in the following ways:

1. An idiom with meaning  $M_1$  is derived from  $M_2$ , a subpart of some initial P-marker. Rules applying to structures derived from  $M_2$  must obey all the government conditions of both  $M_1$  and  $M_2$ .
2. At shallow structure, there may be inserted for those nodes corresponding to subparts of  $M_2$ , only those lexical items marked with the designation of the idiom source which has governed the application of the cyclic rules in that derivation.

The initial P. marker in an idiomatic derivation is the semantic representation of its literal equivalent ( $M_2$ ). However, according to the transderivational constraint, the meaning of the idiom is a different semantic P-marker ( $M_1$ ).

Newmayer claims that whether or not an idiom undergoes a transformational rule depends on whether or not the meaning of that idiom is structurally appropriate to the transformation. Whereas Lakoff (1970c) allowed transderivational constraints to apply to entailments, they still operate across derivations which begin with the same semantic form. Newmayer, on the other hand, does not consider the meaning of an idiom as entailed by the literal sentence, and therefore must resort to some semantic construct. In this case, transderivational constraints operate across the literal sentence and the semantic representation of the idiomatic meaning.

No comment will be made about this approach. Criticism of Newmayer's and Sadock's (1974) treatment follow in Section 2.3 of this chapter.

## 2.2 Sadock (1974)

Although Sadock does not in fact propose a treatment of idioms, he gives a few intriguing suggestions. He distinguishes between expressions whose meaning is encoded in deep representation, and those whose meaning is a result of their use. The meaning of an idiom is encoded in semantic structure whereas the meaning of a metaphor is its use. This dichotomy is based on different tests.

(16) Bill spilled the beans.

(17) Bill spilled the proverbial beans.

(18) \*Bill clumsily spilled the proverbial beans.

(19) \*Bill spilled the beans, which were on sale at two cans for 29¢, to the cops.

The adjective proverbial in (17) occurs only with the idiom and the adverb clumsily in (18) with the nonidiomatic sentence. The nonidiomatic sense of spill the beans cannot take an indirect object, therefore (18) and (19) are ungrammatical. This shows that idioms have cooccurrence properties which reflect their meaning rather than their form. Metaphors, on the other hand, can remain metaphorical no matter what occurs with them in the same sentence.

Sadock bases his analysis of idioms on the parallelism between nonpragmatic idioms and indirect speech acts: "Sentences that show formal reflexes of the speech act for which they are used rather than of the speech act that their surface form seems to represent, will be those that are felt to mean what they do rather than what they say." Contrary-wise to Weinreich (1969) and Newmayer (1972), Sadock underlines the relationship between idioms and metaphors. The dichotomy he draws, however, does not seem to be justified by the facts; independently from the fact that speakers may vary in their judgments on the applicability of some transformations and on the distributional properties of idioms and metaphors, it seems that in most cases the relexicalization or resyntacticization is not complete, in idioms as well as in speech-act idioms.

### 2.3 Difficulties in Generative Semantics

There are serious problems with the kind of treatment Newmayer (1972) argues for. Both Lexicalists and Generativists have in common the implicit notion that the idiomatic meaning of an expression is arbitrary, i.e., the relationship between the meaning of an expression and the meaning of its literal counterpart is arbitrary. As a consequence, the meaning is given an abstract semantic representation symbolized by a paraphrase. How this paraphrase is arrived at is in itself a difficult problem, but

the use grammarians make of it leads to an inadequacy. The analysis of the meaning reduces the thing to be analyzed into elements which lack its crucial features. This section will exemplify why the analysis in terms of transderivational constraints proposed by Newmayer (1972) is inadequate because it is based on this type of fallacy. Not only are these expressions used to capture meaning, but they also serve as a test for syntactic purposes ("whether or not an idiom undergoes a transformation depends on whether or not the meaning of that idiom is structurally appropriate to the transformation" (Newmayer 1972, p. 299)).<sup>4</sup>

What, one may ask, is the meaning of a given expression? Obviously, we convey the same facts about a person when we say either he kicked the bucket or he died, the familiarity of the former notwithstanding. But recall that Generative Semantics is built on the assumption that formal properties mirror meaning. Then, if the paraphrase means the same as the expression, one would expect both to have the same distributional properties, i.e., to occur in the same contexts. One cannot passivize kick the bucket, according to Newmayer (1972), because the meaning of this idiom is to die, a one-place predicate which, of course, does not passivize. It is doubtful that Newmayer shows clear awareness of what he means by "the meaning is." Either the meanings of x and y are exactly

identical, i.e., according to Generative Semantics, x can be substituted for y in any context, or the paraphrase does not have the same distributional properties. In the first case no light is shed on the problem. In the second case partial substitutability has no value.<sup>5</sup> But now, we may ask: is it always true that possible operations on the structural description of paraphrase are the same as operations on idioms, and what are the motivations for determining these paraphrases? Before answering these questions, it is only fair to point out that these difficulties are not the result of faulty reasoning by any particular linguist, but they are inherent to the model itself.

If we take again the example of Passive, (20) represents an idiomatic sketch and (21) a possible paraphrase representing its meaning.

(20) x  $\underbrace{V_t \text{ D.O.}}_{} y$

(21) x  $V_t \text{ D.O.} y$

Then, one might expect that the idiom should passivize, but that is not necessarily the case. In fact, that some idioms do passivize in some instances does not necessarily mean that their paraphrase does, even when one is lucky enough to capture their meaning with a short paraphrase.

(22) Paul a soudoyé le flic.  
"Paul bribed the cop."

- (23) Paul a graissé la patte du flic.  
"Paul greased the paw of the cop."  
(Paul bribed the cop.)
- (24) Le flic a été soudoyé par Paul.  
"The cop was bribed by Paul."
- (25)??La patte du flic a été graissée par Paul.  
"The paw of the cop was greased by Paul."
- (26) \*Le flic a été graissé la patte par Paul.  
"The cop was greased the paw by Paul."

An accurate paraphrase of (22) is (23). Although  $M_1$  (in this case (22)) and  $M_2$  (23) can both passivize, (25) and (26) do not have an idiomatic meaning. This shows that one cannot use the surface structure of a paraphrase to infer any structural property of the idiom. Further, it is not sufficiently clear yet what the exact nature of passive is.

To answer the second question, the motivation for such paraphrases, consider the following. According to Sadock (1974), once an idiom is formed, every cooccurrence of that idiom should properly reflect its meaning, not its form. This is simply not true:

- (27) Paul est mort dans un accident d'avion.  
"Paul died in a plane crash."
- (28) Paul a cassé sa pipe dans un accident d'avion.  
"Paul broke his pipe in a plane crash."  
(Paul died in a plane crash.)
- (29) Paul est mort d'une balle dans le dos.  
"Paul died from a bullet in his back."
- (30) \*Paul a cassé sa pipe d'une balle dans le dos.  
"Paul died from a bullet in his back."

Examples (29) and (30) show that an idiom and its paraphrase do not necessarily occur in the same context. A knowledge of how casser sa pipe originated would probably explain this fact, but it remains that the paraphrase is inadequate since it cannot be used as a basis for analysis. Transderivational constraints operating across the literal sentence and the idiomatic meaning seem incompatible with the fact that there is far from general agreement as far as the transformational potential of idioms is concerned. As is the case for Lexicalists we have seen above, the readings proposed by these Generativists are arrived at intuitively. They are not only supposed to represent meaning, but because of the very nature of the theory they are endowed with the power of interfering with other structures. The relationship of idioms with their paraphrase is then one of cognitive synonymy. We shall see later that it is not the case (Chapter IV).

Another way that transderivational constraints are inadequate here is the behavior of idioms with respect to clefting and extraposition. Idioms sometimes do not undergo clefting or extraposition, but do undergo these rules when there is contrastive stress:

- (31) Paul a un chat dans la gorge.  
       "Paul has a cat in his throat."  
       (Paul has a frog in his throat.)
- (32) \*C'est un chat que Paul a dans la gorge.
- (33) C'est pas un cheveu, c'est un chat  
       que Paul a dans la gorge.

Such idioms would, therefore, have to be marked [-cleft] and [+cleft + contrastive stress]. The rule would need to be stated not as sentence interval, but as possibly depending on the presence or absence of some information in another disjoined element, and would be sensitive to stress patterns. It is difficult to imagine how paraphrase could be used to represent this kind of constraint.

One would preserve a certain autonomy of semantics: kick the bucket is at a different level of language than die. The idiomatic meaning is the conveyed meaning of an utterance, not its structure. Furthermore, mechanisms involved are different: one cannot use die to infer any structural properties of kick the bucket. Because the encoding of semantic characteristics into the structural meaning of a sentence leads one to make use of paraphrases with all the inconveniences we have seen, one should maintain the distinction between pragmatics and semantics, and allow another level of language to interact with syntactic processes.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Further Problems in Generative Semantics

We have seen two possible approaches to the treatment of idioms: one would have them listed as complex entries in the dictionary, the other calls for a device like "idiom list" or "idiom inventory." There are



compelling arguments in favor of the unit treatment. First, the meaning of an idiom is not a compositional function of the elements which constitute it, i.e., they cannot be decomposed since it is impossible to match part of the meaning of an idiom with a single constituent of the idiomatic sentence structure. Second, some of the elements do not occur by themselves, but only in an idiom context: for example, prou (peu ou prou) cannot have a separate entry in the lexicon since it does not have any meaning by itself. Third, some whole idioms do not have literal equivalents, so not only a particular lexical item, but an entire sentence would be marked as an exception. Finally, fourth, they are recalcitrant to transformations although they do not necessarily include lexical items which constitute lexical exceptions in Lakoff's (1970a) terms.

However, we have seen that there are enormous weaknesses in such an analysis. First, idioms obey the same phonological and morphological rules as their literal equivalents: verb inflection, agreement and so forth apply to both sentences in the same fashion. Second, idioms constitute the only violation of the general principle that lexical items should replace only constituents. Third, some transformations are applicable, i.e., within the framework of Generative grammar they can be explained only in terms of operations on nodes; furthermore, the fact that

some of these idioms contain variables is impossible to account for in the unit treatment without having recourse to a heavy machinery.

We are then faced with a paradox: on the one hand one set of arguments seems to require a unit treatment, while another set of arguments shows that this analysis is untenable. However, if we take a closer look at these two sets of arguments, we can see that they are not dealing with the same level of language: the arguments in favor of a unit treatment are semantic, whereas the arguments against are more formal in nature. The only exception is their behavior with respect to transformation, although in the first set, their transformational defectiveness is stressed, whereas in the second set, their potentiality for at least some transformation is stressed. This, therefore, does not contribute a strong argument in favor of either hypothesis.

All the analyses presented have tried to find a way out of this apparent paradox: Weinreich (1969) proposed an idiom list coupled with an idiom comparison rule, and complex entries within the lexicon. This very diversified treatment is justified on the grounds that the phenomena are heterogenous. (To what extent this constitutes a justification will be investigated in Chapter IV.) Although published later, Fraser (1970) shows less sophistication

than Weinreich (1969) in his treatment. Idioms are treated as units and marked as undergoing or not undergoing specific operations. Whether or not these different approaches try to account for the meaning of expressions, they ultimately are confronted with their transformational potential. From this standpoint, it is fairly obvious that a purely transformational explanation of the facts does not work: a major fact never mentioned in the different treatments is that not only do idioms have a restricted transformational potential, but there seems to be a great deal of variation as far as intuition of speakers is concerned. Some expressions will retain their idiomatic reading after having undergone, say, Passive, for some speakers and not for others: for Newmayer (1972), spill the beans passivizes while for Sadock (1974) it does not. There is, of course, the possibility that speakers within a linguistic community would tend to reanalyze these expressions, as we have seen in Chapter II, through homophonic substitution by assigning some semantic content to parts of an idiom. Thus, tomber dans les pommes < tomber dans la pâmes, where the literal meaning is lost (pâmes = faint) to the benefit of a vivid metaphor. The applicability of a transformation would then depend on the possibility of matching elements within an idiom with single constituents. One could explain this phenomenon in terms of different grammars for different

speakers, but one would miss a generalization. Government conditions on rules should have some consistency if they are to be of any value. This fact, with respect to idioms, has generally been overlooked by both early Generativists and Lexicalists: marking these expressions as undergoing or not undergoing specific rules according to specific speakers would make the theory reach the point where it is so loaded with ad hoc moves that one would feel very uncomfortable in handling it. There is no elegant solution to the problem of degrees of grammaticality.

Idioms seem to be candidates for a treatment within Generative Semantics, since that theory is based on the assumption that formal properties mirror meaning. Idioms indeed have some of the distribution of their literal counterpart:

(34) Paul spilled the beans to the cops.

The literal meaning of spill does not take an indirect object.

(35) \*Matthew spilled his soup to his mother.

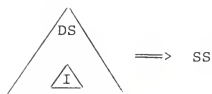
The difficulties encountered so far are reflected in a split among Generative Semanticists on whether one should represent the meaning of a sentence in an abstract underlying representation or as a logical representation associated with the sentence as an entailment.

### 3.1 The Grammatical vs. Logico-grammatical Controversy

There has been for some time a controversy among linguists as to what the best treatment to give all those sentences whose conveyed meaning is different from their surface meaning is. Idiomatic expressions belong to this class but are by no means the only ones. The fact that it is so must be reflected in the theory to achieve a generalization, i.e., to strengthen it. Some linguists, following Sadock (1974), have argued for abstract sentences symbolizing the covert elements which could be deduced from the surface form of a sentence. Others, following Gordon and Lakoff (1971) have opted for a logico-grammatical treatment with transderivational constraints applying across a sentence and its involvement. The fundamental questions are: What is the meaning of such sentences? What is their underlying representation? What aspect of meaning must be encoded in deep structure and what is the result of the use of such sentences?

3.1.1 The grammatical hypothesis. A similarity between these sentences which have an illocutionary force different from their surface structure and idioms has been pointed out by Sadock (1974): his analysis in terms of abstract sentences considers that the involvement of a sentence can be represented in the history of the derivation of this sentence. This can be represented schematically as:

(36)



DS = deep structure

I = involvement of a sentence S in context

⇒ = transformational rules, derivational constraints, etc.

How are we to account for the fact that, in a given situation,<sup>7</sup> a sentence has a different meaning than its surface form? An abstract syntax analysis would consider that the idiomatic meaning of an utterance is encoded in its deep structure, is part of the abstract representation of the sentence. In that case, one may ask what would the rules which generate the surface structure of the idiom look like, and how could they be independently motivated, since they would be different for practically every idiom. The arbitrary nature of such rules is evident since they would have to match parts of the surface structure of idioms with parts of its meaning.

The second difficulty met by a purely grammatical treatment, as a consequence of the theory, is that in Generative Semantics, there must be a one-to-one relationship between a sentence and its meaning. To one sentence corresponds one and only one meaning. If we follow Sadock's (1974) hypothesis, once a metaphor has become an

idiom, i.e., when the meaning of an utterance is encoded in its deep structure, then one would not expect idioms to show formal reflexes of their own surface structure in terms of distribution, cooccurrence properties and transformations. Consider, however:

- (37) C'est une sacrée pilule qu'il a avalée.  
"It is a heck of a pill that he swallowed."
- (38) Paul en tient une (de cuite, de couche).  
"Paul is holding one (drunkenness, coat of stupidity)."

A purely grammatical treatment is also inconsistent with the phenomenon of idiom variance and decomparable idioms like:

- (39) prendre/donner le change  
"to take/to give the change  
(to be fooled/to fool [someone])
- (40) spill the beans/the facts
- (41) bury the hatchet/our differences

This phenomenon is not restricted to idioms, but can be related to other cases of sentences which are ambiguous: Sadock (1974) has shown that whimperatives, for instance, while behaving like imperative sentences with respect to distributions and transformations, still retain some of the formal properties of the questions that they appear to be.

Questions can be conjoined only with another question:

(42) \*Are you ready to go? And I'll take the car out.

(43) Are you ready to go? And do I have to lock the house?

But whimperatives can, on the other hand, be followed by declaratives:

(44) Will you take out the garbage? And I'll do the dishes.

This is a consequence of the fact that a frequently associated use has become encoded in its semantic form. Some speech acts can become speech-act idioms just like metaphors can become idioms.

3.1.2 The logico-grammatical treatment. Another approach seems necessary in the light of the following problem: there are cases where the pragmatic environment of utterances play a crucial role in their understanding:

(45) Are you a resident of the state of Florida?

(46) Well, I just paid \$64 for each credit hour.

(47) Well, I pay \$24 for each credit hour.

Examples (46) and (47) are acceptable answers, respectively negative and positive, to the question (45), if one is a graduate student at the University of Florida at Gainesville; this does not mean that they have the same underlying structure as

(48a) No, I am not.

(48b) Yes, I am.



but, since out-of-state residents must pay an additional \$40 per credit hour per quarter, (46) implies that the speaker is not a resident, whereas (47) implies that he is. In this specific case, social context and arithmetic play a crucial role in the understanding of sentences. It would not be reasonable, however, to try to incorporate these patterns in the grammar, since it would reduplicate a great many operations to the point of unwieldiness. But are these possible contexts of any import on the structure of sentences, i.e., on their distribution and other grammatical properties.<sup>8</sup> Can we possibly incorporate into the grammar a set of contexts which would modify the surface form of sentences through transderivational constraints?

In an influential article inspired by Grice's (1975) work on conversational implicature, Gordon and Lakoff (1971) sought to formalize and incorporate into the framework of Generative Semantics conversational principles. They claim that there are systemic rules which are dependent on these principles, and that all speech acts that can imply<sup>9</sup> another speech act in some circumstances belong to the same class, to be accounted for in the same way. Consider (49):

(49) It's cold in here.

which uttered by a duke to his servant can be used to convey something like (50):

(50) Close the window.

through a chain of inference. The servant understands that his master is uncomfortable and that he (the servant) must do something to remedy the situation, since the duke is probably not commenting on the weather. In order for (49) to be understood as (50), some conditions must be met, a certain context must be present: the butler must be able and willing to obey his master, and must be able to make the inference from (49) to (50). As an illustration of their claim that the surface form of sentences show a dependence on conversational principles, consider:

(51) Why paint your house purple?

(52) Why do you paint your house purple?

(53) You should not paint your house purple.

Whereas (52) can be ambiguous between a true question and a reproach, (51) always has the meaning of (53). The deletion of you + tense happens just in case there is a conversational implicature like (53), via a transderivational constraint.

But there is a difference between (49) and (51). Whereas (51) always carries the meaning of (53), (49) can have practically any entailment if one provides an adequate context. Conditions about the world can vary infinitely: imagine the duke uttering (49) in his secret laboratory where he is conducting experiments on dangerous

substances requiring low temperatures, his butler will not be expected to close the window, thereby ruining the experiment.

This difference is reflected in the distribution of (49) and other speech acts involving conversational implicature, like (54).

(54) Close the window, since my hands are full.

(55) \*It's cold in here, since my hands are full.

(56) Can you take out the garbage, please,  
since my hands are full.

(57) Take out the garbage, since my hands  
are full.

It is not clear whether Gordon and Lakoff (1971) claim that a given utterance can convey or conveys a given entailment, and, although both the sentence and its entailment represent real levels of psychological meaning, how long the chain of inference may be and therefore what the relevant entailment within this chain is. (49) in the context given above can imply:

(58) The window is open.

then

(59) You're supposed to do something.

etc. It is clear from (54) through (57) that reason complements may depend only on one entailment: they can disambiguate a sentence like "can you take out the garbage" which can be understood as (and only as) having two meanings,

but not sentences like (40) with its potentially enormous set of entailments. This would suggest that the distribution of speech acts is not conditioned by their conversational implicature, but by a conventional entailment. Another case in point is the application of tag-formation. Consider:

(60) Finish that by tomorrow, {will you?  
  {why don't you?

(61) \*You should finish that by tomorrow, {will you?  
  {why don't you?

If tag question formation were sensitive to conversational implicature, then (61) would be grammatical since (62)

(62) You should finish that by tomorrow.

may conversationally imply (63)

(63) Finish that by tomorrow.

This illustrates again the problem of the import of conversational implicature. It may or may not trigger some transformation, but Gordon and Lakoff (1971) offer no way of constraining this principle, i.e., of deciding in which case it applies or does not apply. There is another difficulty with the notion that syntactic rules can be sensitive to conversational implicature, namely that it leads to the fact that it becomes impossible to decide between an abstract syntax treatment and a logico-grammatical account. The distribution of reflexives in imperative sentences show that only second person reflexives are possible. Consider (64):

$$(64) \quad \text{wash} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} *myself \\ yourself \\ *himself \\ *herself \\ *ourselves \\ yourselves \\ *themselves \end{array} \right\}$$

which is taken as evidence that there is an underlying second person subject. There is a syntactic process, i.e., the distribution of spurious reflexives which depends on the presence in a higher abstract sentence of second person subject. But if syntactic rules can be sensitive to conversational implicature, then we may say that in this case a second person subject is conversationally implied by the sentence, i.e., is present in a conversationally entailed sentence. The problem is, there is no possibility of deciding between the two analyses.

A possible way of saving Gordon and Lakoff's analysis is to consider that rules are not dependent on conversational implicature, but on conventional implicature; this will be illustrated in Chapter IV. This solution would not require deciding between the two analyses, but in turn would confront us with the problem of representing this duality mentioned by Sadock (1974): the idiomatic reading of speech-act idioms and of nonpragmatic idioms is in fact another literal meaning. Unfortunately, given the present framework of Generative Semantics, there is no way of representing this duality.

#### 4. Conclusion and Looking Ahead

In light of these different problems, which solution would be best to account for the different properties of idioms? We have seen that the two hypotheses outlined respectively in Sections 1 and 2 run into difficulties: the Lexicalist approach has too many drawbacks and calls for too many ad hoc devices to remedy these. According to Chomsky (1965), syntax is central: it can be described as a formal system which is not essentially connected with communication. Semantic information must be dealt with in the lexicon or the interpretive semantic component. It is impossible to account for expressions whose meaning is different from their surface form, whether they are idiomatic, or whether some pragmatic aspects of utterances have an influence on their grammatical behavior. For Chomsky, a theory of speech acts is a theory of performance rather than a theory of competence, but surely, the study of the inherent ability to perform speech acts is within the domain of linguistic competence (Searle 1975).

The Generative Semanticists base their analysis on the assumption that formal properties mirror meaning, and therefore must claim that to each semantic structure corresponds only one meaning. The grammar is semantically based, but instead of "dictionary"

readings, we have paraphrases which substitute an English sentence for another English sentence: semantic characteristics are explained with the very elements which are to be explained, and the argument becomes circular.

Generative Semantics claim that to each semantic structure corresponds only one meaning; this is clearly inadequate to show anything about idioms or speech-act idioms. The result of an utterance is its meaning and its entailment or involvement; this can easily be shown with double-entendre phrases, insults, jokes, etc., where it is impossible to assert something while denying its entailment or involvement. For instance, it would be difficult to maintain, after saying (66)

(66) You don't look a day over 40.

to a young person that one didn't mean to convey that this person looked older than his/her real age. The problem is, then, how to represent these involvements? It is impossible to choose between a logico-grammatical treatment like the one proposed by Gordon and Lakoff (1971) and a logical treatment involving hyper-sentences of the kind Sadock (1974) advocates. Must the meaning of an idiom be encoded in the deep representation of a sentence? Or is it the result of its use? In Generative Semantics, it is impossible to account for those idioms whose meanings are the results of entailments. To be consistent with the one sentence-one

meaning postulate, the idiomatic process must occur overnight; but the facts noted by Sadock (1974) show otherwise: distribution, substitution and grammatical properties suggest a continuum in the process of lexicalization. To make matters worse, not only do grammaticality judgments vary from speaker to speaker, but some idioms retained cooccurrence properties of the literal counterpart. This would suggest that the lexicalization is not always complete, i.e., the meaning of an idiom is not totally encoded in the expression. This continuum may then vary from speaker to speaker; this variation will be explained in the next chapter by the fact that some speakers may be aware of the metaphor from which an idiom arose, or tend to reanalyze this idiom and make it fit a putative metaphorical expression. This happens because speakers tend to assume that the entailment of a sentence is its meaning. For example, consider the following situation: a father is trying to reach his wife over the phone and he reaches his 3-year old son:

(67) Father: "Is your mommy there?"

(67a) Son: "Yes." (hangs up or waits)

(67b) Son: "Yes, do you want to speak to her?"

(67c) Son: "Yes, hold on, I'll get her."

(67d) Son: [yelling] "Mom, telephone!"



The first time the father might call home, his son would probably answer something like (a) to his inquiry. It will take the child some time to understand that by uttering (67), his father does not merely want to check on his wife, but wants to speak to her. When the child will have learned to make the inference or reply accordingly (c) or (d), one would not claim, however, that (d) is synonymous with something like:

(68) Yes, she is here, I'll go and get her.

a fortiori, that (d) and (68) have the same semantic structure but they do function similarly in this given context.

Although it seems difficult in the light of the arguments developed above to decide between a grammatical and a logico-grammatical explanation, since every sentence which can be derived grammatically can be derived logically, too, it is hard to imagine what a rule deriving an idiom from its underlying semantic structure would look like, and more important, what kind of independent motivation it would rest upon.

We will give evidence in the next chapter that the relationship which idioms hold with their literal counterpart is one of entailment, a relationship which has become fossilized to various degrees, thus explaining why they behave so erratically and why there is such a variation in judgments of grammaticality among speakers. This phenomenon

of fossilization can be explained by the fact that most of these expressions have been borrowed language internally.

### Notes to Chapter III

<sup>1</sup>See Katz (1972).

<sup>2</sup>It is necessary to point out that these two approaches are not advocated anywhere as exclusively, because of some obvious disadvantages. For example, while Katz and Postal (1963) may be basically viewed as an illustration of the unit treatment, since "the semantic dictionary must also contain entries for the phrase idioms of the language," it provides for a certain autonomy of lexical items within idioms, since the idiomatic meaning can be carried over by transformations, as question formation in"

(i) Did John Kick the bucket?

<sup>3</sup>See Katz (1973, p. 367). Katz presents a different approach: instead of marking the whole idiom as not undergoing some transformation, he proposes to mark only elements within idioms with the feature [+idiom]. Thus, transformations will not apply "if the structural change of the transformation specifies a formal operation on a component of the substring that is marked [+idiom], regardless of the fact that it otherwise satisfies the structural analysis of the transformation" (p. 365). This is simpler than both Weinreich (1969) and Fraser's (1970) notations, but is still inadequate to handle the facts presented in Chapter IV.

<sup>4</sup>John Morreall (1976) gives an argument questioning the validity of makeshift semantic structures (in this case, the derivation of kill from cause to die).

<sup>5</sup>Moreover, what is a meaning which passivizes or does not? What Newmayer should have said would be something like: "The idiom does not passivize because the structural description of the paraphrase given to represent the meaning of the idiom does not passivize."

<sup>6</sup>See Morgan (1975) for a few examples of interaction of pragmatics and syntax.

<sup>7</sup>See Grice (1975).

<sup>8</sup>See Morgan (1975).

<sup>9</sup>See Morgan (1977).

<sup>10</sup>See Morgan (1977).

## CHAPTER IV IDIOMS AND CONVENTIONAL IMPLICATURE

### 1. Introduction

This chapter will attempt to show that there is a way out of this dilemma, and that the solution proposed not only can account for the characteristics of idioms described in Chapter II, but that they constitute but one instance of a broader phenomenon, where knowledge of the world becomes knowledge of the language. The question is open as to how much of a meaning can be fully specified in an underlying or logical representation. We have seen that both Lexicalists and Generativists based their description on the notion that every aspect of the meaning can be fully developed in an "abstract" representation: i.e., Weinreich (1969) attributes part of the gloss of the idiom to parts of the idiom in the form of semantic and syntactic features, and Newmayer (1972) gives a fully spelled phrase representing the idiomatic meaning.

Sections 2 and 3 of the present chapter will be devoted to mechanisms involved in metaphorical processes, Sections 4 and 5 to the process of fossilization. This process of fossilization will be shown to be the result of

the conventionalization of implicature. Section 2 deals with what constitutes the meaning of an idiom, and whether or not idioms have literal equivalents. All the analyses so far proposed are based on the assumption that they do, and have been shown to be weak because of this. As a consequence of this, we will investigate why speakers use idioms instead of literal expressions, i.e., what else is involved besides the mere informational content of idiomatic expressions. This will lead us into the problem of the origin of phrase idioms. Since most phrase idioms originated as metaphors, Section 2.1 will deal with what we will term "lexical metaphors" as expanded through a tradition of rhetorics by DuMarsais (1730), Fontanier (1968), Le Guern (1973) and Jakobson (1963). Another type of figure of speech which has never been dealt with, as far as we know, is the type of phrase metaphors which cannot be reduced to a sort of componential metaphorical analysis, i.e., their meaning is not reducible to a concatenation of metaphorical readings of each lexical item of the expression; this type, which we label "pragmatic metaphors," will be investigated in Section 2.2.

In Section 3, we will see how this distinction can predict the behavior of idioms: it is shown that the impossibility of application of transformations to idioms is caused by an absence of reference. This absence of

reference can be explained by two factors; first, the fact that some expressions are the result of a pragmatic metaphoric process, and second, that some terms have become archaic, i.e., some lexical metaphors have undergone fossilization as a result of a loss of their pragmatic environment. The behavior of idioms with respect to these transformations which involve reference, like Pro., Equi., Rel. Form. justifies further the distinction established in Section 2.

Section 4 will deal with idiom formation: what the requirements are for a metaphor to become an idiom and what the consequences are; idioms are defined as the result of the conventionalization of implicature of a given expression. This conventionalization will be defined as the process by which an expression can have one and only one possible entailment regardless of context. Apparent counter-examples to this analysis will be shown to be cases of reanalysis by speakers, who reassign a referent to parts of idioms. This phenomenon of reanalysis is crucial for the theory in that it helps solve the dilemma of Chapter III. If speakers are able to reanalyze some idioms, this means that two analyses for a given expression are possible, and one can be right from different viewpoints. This contradicts the implicit stance of Generative Semantics that to one meaning can correspond only one semantic structure. We

will propose then, in conclusion (Section 6), a slight modification of the theory to account for these facts.

One may wonder why we should study figures of speech, like metaphors. It may be felt an intrusion of an ill-understood category in the strict domain of linguistic description. It may be felt further that from a synchronic point of view, the historical description of such figures is irrelevant to the present-day mechanisms involved in the encoding and decoding of idioms. Since idioms originated as such figures of speech as metaphors, and they retain some of the properties of the sentences taken literally, it does not seem unreasonable to investigate the semantic process by which an expression came to mean something else than its literal meaning, and specifically, for those expressions which became lexicalized, their development. We will then have to investigate how the idiomatic meaning was brought about, by which mechanisms of figures of speech. It is not our purpose to make an exhaustive diachronic study of these expressions, but studying how a new meaning appears may shed some light on their grammatical properties. Nor is it our purpose to make an exhaustive diachronic description of idioms, but as we shall see, their origin plays a crucial role in their present grammatical behavior. Their diversified origins can account for their lack of regularity.

Our purpose is to show that they constitute a good illustration of how language works.

## 2. The Meaning of Idioms

What is the meaning of an idiom? And why do speakers use idioms instead of straightforward expressions? Upon asking these questions, we are immediately confronted with a more complex one: are such straightforward expressions indeed used in lieu of idioms, i.e., does one say the same thing when one uses one or the other? Are there such things as literal equivalents?

The Lexicalists have tried to incorporate idioms into the lexicon by attributing to them a specific meaning. If, in some cases, this might seem fairly straightforward, it is not obvious that one can always do so; for example, shoot the breeze has been given the gloss to chat idly (Weinreich 1969); but in many instances, these glosses are inadequate: one must have recourse to lengthy paraphrases to capture the meaning of an idiom. These paraphrases might incorporate not only lexical items which hold a relationship of synonymy with the idiom, but might, too, specify the extralinguistic context in which they occur. Consider:

- (1) Pierre pend la crémaillère de sa  
 "Pierre hangs the fireplace-hook of his  
 nouvelle maison demain soir.  
 new house tomorrow night."



(Pierre is having a house-warming party tomorrow night.)

This might be paraphrased as: Pierre is ready to move into the house he bought (built) and he is giving a house-warming party (to celebrate the event). In this case, the house might not have a fireplace, but the "metaphor" is still understood as representing an attribute of the house. Contrast with:

- (2) Pierre suce les pissenlits par  
 "Pierre is sucking the dandelions by  
 la racine.  
 the root."

(Pierre is dead.)

There can be a paraphrase for (2): Pierre is six feet under the ground, therefore he is dead. None of the lexical items, however, can be attributed to Pierre. This is the description of a state of affairs which occurs simultaneously with Pierre's being dead, but is not in a metonymic relationship. (1) can undergo practically all topic-changing transfigurations, although no substitution, and crémaillère carries all the metaphorical significance. (2), on the other hand, cannot undergo any topic-changing transformation, and no lexical item carries metaphorical significance. This type of distinction cannot be handled by the Lexicalist approach.

The other approach, which we may label the Generative Semantics hypothesis, calls for some mechanisms

which do not seem to be well motivated, as for instance the semantic representation of the meaning of idioms by Newmayer (1972). This approach, too, is inadequate in dealing with the meaning of an idiom. When one asks a speaker what a given idiom means, one is likely to get a paraphrase for some cases of the idiom (die for kick-the-bucket) or be given some stage directions. The latter is the case with (3).

- (3) Pierre marche à côté de ses pompes.  
 "Pierre walks beside his shoes."  
 (Pierre is mad.)

Here a context must be set up to give the meaning of the idiom, which involves the visualization of a situation, namely outside the domain of linguistics; therefore, it cannot be accounted for with a paraphrase, and this is, of course, a serious blow to the analyses seen in Chapter III. In this respect, metaphorical and idiomatic meanings can be viewed as cases of implicature, since the context determines whether they are to be understood as literal or nonliteral. The intention of the speaker is then of primary importance for the use of an idiom.<sup>1</sup> The use of a non-literal expression conveys something more than an equivalent straightforward expression: there is first a certain distancing of the speaker from his speech act, and there always seems to be a judgment on the speaker's part when he utters an idiom. Whereas one can use a literal

sentence in any kind of social situation, provided that the topic of conversation is not itself offensive, one is not expected to utter certain idioms within a formal context, unless to break a stilted atmosphere. One does not say, for instance,

(4) Our chairman kicked the bucket.

to announce the death of the chairman at a faculty meeting. Idioms are not interchangeable with their paraphrases; they always carry a psychological implication which is impossible to represent in a reasonably short paraphrase. Idioms are used to name a situation, when literal expression is available, or to introduce a connotation otherwise absent.

From the evidence found in Fraser (1970), there seems to be a continuum from metaphor to idiom. Furthermore, the different types of constraints applying to idioms and metaphors are not restricted to either category, and the distinction established by Sadock (1974) holds true for both ends of the continuum, but is not sufficient to support an analysis. Formal properties, although they may sometimes reveal a great deal about meaning, are not sufficient to account for all the facts, because there is often no principled way of deciding on what is relevant to a description.<sup>2</sup> In our view, Fraser's (1970) hierarchy still stands even though we do not agree with his analysis. Therefore, if

certain distributional facts or transformational properties may obscure an analysis in terms of formal operations, these facts are the result of some more fundamental operations, which are not restricted to sentences. These operations bear on the very nature of language and on how speakers perceive and talk about the world. Therefore, we must investigate the nature of these processes, i.e., since idioms originated as tropes, find out first what type of operations is involved in terms of current semantic theories. We will, then, have to distinguish between idioms which are the results of a purely formal operation, i.e., idiomatic expression in Searle's (1975) sense and idioms issued from operations on reference or on meaning (metaphors and other figures of speech).

Figures of speech cannot be derived as literal constructions. Unlike non-idioms, for which Generative Semantics can provide fairly satisfactory derivations, figures of speech depend crucially on pragmatic considerations.

This distinction can explain why Generative Semantics is at a loss in accounting for those expressions which are the result of play on the reference, since it is difficult to incorporate cognitive knowledge within a grammatical description. Idiomatic expressions (Searle 1975) on the other hand, can be accounted for formally

since stage directions do not affect the shape of the sentence as far as transformations like Question Formation, Imp. and so forth are concerned.

The problem of derivation of expressions involving some type of referential operation has been largely ignored by both Transformationalists and Generativists, except for a few attempts (Borkin 1972). More recently, however, Downing (1977), in a paper entitled "On the Creation and Use of English Compound Nouns," investigates the process involved in the creation and interpretation of novel noun + noun compounds. She gives evidence that there is no finite list of appropriate compounding relationships to account for the relationships between two nouns, but that the possibility of combination is dependent upon the use to which they are put and the interpretability thereof. Subjects she tested were asked in one instance to provide interpretations for novel compounds out of context. Although the subjects did not find these compounds to be impossible to interpret, they had difficulty classifying them into traditional categories such as container/containe, part, whole, etc.; instead, subjects had to set up quite elaborate real-world contexts, as illustrated by these examples (her (12)):

- (4a) frog-slime: the slime that frogs exude  
to keep from dehydrating
- (4b) dinner-bath: a bath taken in preparation .  
for dinner

- (4c) oil-bowl: the bowl into which the oil of the engine is drained during an oil change

It appears from her findings that there are no absolute limitations on the semantic or syntactic structures from which noun + noun compounds are derived; therefore, every compound will have a particular paraphrase assigned to it, and no generalization can be drawn from it.

According to Downing's (1977) observations, then, there cannot be a derivational explanation for noun + noun compounds, which can always be created to fit, or describe a situation. The same problem appears with metaphors and other figures of speech. If one tries to derive transformationally idioms or metaphors, one is faced with two major difficulties: first, it is impossible to account for the different steps which would constitute such derivations in a general manner. Second, the recoverability of crucial deleted elements is impossible out of context. It is, therefore, impossible to account for these facts in a purely formal way: once again arises the problem of justifying such derivations.

The classical theory of tropes (Du Marsais 1730, Fontanier 1968) has tried to set up categories which would constitute a productive framework for metonymies. As a matter of fact, a justification for a derivational analysis could be drawn from the fact that some categories

are very productive both for noun + noun compounds and metonymies, for instance:

CAUSE:

- |     |                       |                                      |
|-----|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| (5) | <u>food poisoning</u> | for: <u>poisoning caused by food</u> |
|     | <u>toothache</u>      | for: <u>ache caused by tooth</u>     |

LOCATION:

- |     |                      |   |
|-----|----------------------|---|
| (6) | <u>potato field</u>  | for: <u>field covered with potatoes</u> |
|     | <u>spinach plate</u> | for: <u>plate filled with spinach</u>   |

The list can be expanded easily.

For these categories, one can postulate a rule which would delete the predicates CAUSE or LOCATION to obtain the compounds, and there could be a justification for such a rule because of the great productivity thus achieved.

These categories, however, are far from sufficient to generate an important number of compounds or metonymies, and one must then have recourse to unpleasant operations of deletion of semantically relevant material as seen in (4). The difficulty here is that this semantic material is idiosyncratic to each compound, and its deletion is not independently justifiable. Another point against this type of operations is that constraints which prevent certain types of compounds from being formed stem from the nature of entities being denoted, i.e., nonlinguistic

phenomena. Thus, compounds such as (7) and (8) are judged non-interpretable:

(7) fork-spoon

(8) egg-bird

In (7), an object is either a fork or a spoon, the characteristics of one excluding those of the other. The interpretation of (8) out of context is judged impossible because it is felt to be pleonastic (all birds come from eggs).

Because of this great number of possible paraphrases, one cannot attempt to derive compounds from a limited set of structures. We have here, as in phrase idioms, a case where the meaning of the whole is greater than the meaning of the sum of the parts. This is so because noun + noun compounds are used as idioms to name preexisting entities which have not been named yet. The environment in which they arise is crucial to their understanding and is reflected in them: this is evident from the fact that there cannot be a reasonably limited number of deletion operations or a finite set of paraphrases to capture their meaning. A unified theory of language, if such a thing is at all possible, must take into account the pragmatic aspect of language.<sup>3</sup>



## 2.1 Lexical Metaphors

We made earlier (Chapter II) the distinction between lexical idioms and phrase idioms. The former are idioms made up of compound nouns (like blind alley, red herring) or adjectives. The latter contain a verb and an object or complement (beat around the bush, hit the ceiling, etc.). This distinction is justified, not surprisingly in the case of metaphors and other figures of speech. The classical theory of tropes (Du Marsais 1730, Fontanier 1968), as well as more recent theories (as Jakobson 1963) has always dealt with figures of speech constituted by one lexical item, like a noun, adjective or verb.

Metaphors have been traditionally defined as comparisons or analogies between two terms or a term and a mental representation. This definition is vague, however, and it seems that this process is more complex and involves other operations than just comparison. The reason why we will investigate this phenomenon will become clearer in Section 3: the nature of idioms is crucial to the understanding of their meaning as well as of their grammatical behavior.

The classical theory of tropes has always distinguished two major figures of speech, i.e., metaphor and metonymy. Metonymy is viewed as an operation which affects the reference: it is the result of a transfer of reference

and is characterized by a gap in the relationship of language with extralinguistic reality; it is usually accounted for by an ellipsis:

- (9) a Chevrolet                      for: a car made by Chevrolet  
Derrida is hard to read            for: Derrida's writings are hard to read

Here again, the list of possible ellipse is easily expandable: part/whole, cause/effect, container/containee, etc. However, the gap between metonymic and literal reading cannot be totally explained by a purely elliptical analysis; when we say, the hospital for the hospital staff, as in

- (10) The hospital went on strike.

We combine two different elements: first, the expression of the relation which exists between two realities (or entities) where one gives to the other the world which is used to denote it; second, information given by the pragmatic context:

- (11) (x within) the hospital → ([+human] working for) hospital

This constitutes the totality of information shared by the speaker and the listener; there are then two levels of interpretation.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that metonymies are extremely productive in a similar fashion to the compounding of NPs in English. They constitute an important source of word formation and once a metonymy has become lexicalized, it is not seen as a transgression.

If the mechanism of metonymy can be explained by a shift of reference, the mechanism of metaphors, on the other hand, can be explained by the suppression of parts of the semantic features constituting the word used; this is the reason why it has been held for a transgression of selectional restriction by structural semanticists. Consider:

(12) This man is a lion.

It is obvious that if we are not uttering a non-sense, we are establishing a relation between a man and a lion. From this, we will retain only the features compatible to both man and lion, i.e., courage, pride, majesty, and discard those which would not fit the comparison, i.e., a four-legged animal, living in the savannah in Africa, etc. It is conceivable that this type of metaphor can be accounted for within a componential semantics, i.e., in terms of features attributed to lexical items. It is then not a case of violation of selectional restrictions, but an instance where only the relevant features have been retained.<sup>5</sup>

Metaphorical process, however, is not totally independent from context, and deciding on the relevant features within such an analysis will depend largely on the situation: using lion for man, for instance, could serve to isolate from a group of people an individual who

has long and bushy red hair. An analysis in terms of selection and features, therefore, will reflect only partially what is happening in the metaphorical process.

The analysis in terms of features has prompted, as we have seen in Chapter III, structural semanticists to extend it from the lexical item taken metaphorically, to the whole sentence constituting a metaphor, thereby attributing to each lexical item parts of the meaning of the sentence. A good illustration is Weinreich's (1969) approach which leads to a multiplication of different devices which cannot be justified and are inadequate.

This type of metaphor, which involves substitution of one lexical item for another one, can undergo any transformation that the sentence taken nonmetaphorically undergoes:

- (13a) The old buzzard is preying on the little angel.
- (13b) That's the little angel the old buzzard is preying on.
- (13c) The little angel is being preyed on by the old buzzard.
- (13d) The old buzzard, who works at the office, is preying on the little angel.

Example(13) can undergo Clefting, Passive, and its elements can be relativized. Some phrase metaphors can be constituted by several of these lexical metaphors, in which case the metaphorical meaning of the whole sentence is arrived at by

the concatenation of the metaphorical readings of the elements which constitute it:

- (14) Pierre a dû ingurgiter un sermon  
 "Pierre had to swallow a sermon  
 du doyen.  
 from the dean."

One usually only ingurgitates solids, just as sermons are usually delivered by men of the cloth. What happens here is that both lexical items are taken metaphorically to mean something in the order of: "Pierre had to listen against his will to a particularly unwelcome speech from the dean." The elements of signification which are retained are not those compatible with the world, but with the context that they define for each other. Both ingurgiter and sermon do, however, have a semantic autonomy, as witnessed in numerous variances:

- (15) { avaler                    une { leçon  
       { ingurgiter                { pilule  
                                   des { couleuvre  
                                   des { reproches  
                                   des { reproches

In short, lexical metaphors are characterized by an ability to undergo rules because the scope of the metaphorical meaning does not extend to a structure broader than the lexical item.

## 2.2 Pragmatic Metaphors

Although, as we have seen, all metaphors are operations on the reference of a given lexical item, there

is a class of expressions which cannot be dealt with within a componential semantic theory. If it is conceivable to analyze a lexical metaphor in terms of features that the word would share with the term which it qualifies, and the features which must be deleted, a great number of phrase metaphors share the characteristic that their meaning is not reducible to the sum of a metaphorical interpretation of each of the lexical items included in them. A "nonliteral" componential analysis is then impossible. The meaning is not the result of a comparison between the literal meaning and a possible gloss of the idiomatic meaning. If we say:

- (16) Pierre a passé l'arme à gauche.  
 "Pierre passed the arm to the left."  
 (Pierre is dead.)

Passer, l'arme, passer à gauche cannot, in isolation, be interpreted metaphorically. The meaning of this idiom (to be dead) is greater than and different from the meanings of its parts. It does not only consist in a transfer of reference of the lexical items, as is the case for lexical metaphors, but calls on the cognitive knowledge of speakers and listeners. It is only a set of conditions about the world (something like stage directions) which enables the listener to understand this type of metaphor. In this case, each of the lexical items is understood literally, but their situation in the pragmatic context is different. The expression takes up a new meaning because of

this context. This type of expressions cannot be analyzed in terms of features which would be compatible with the context to be described, as is the case with lexical metaphors. It does not appear either that they can be developed with a full sentence of which they would be an ellipsis, as is the case with metonymies (i.e., their fall for the cause of their fall). It appears that their meaning is the result of a purely referential phenomenon, without any syntagmatic interaction. Furthermore, whereas metonymies do not behave erratically as far as syntactic properties are concerned, this is not the case for pragmatic metaphors: their meaning, distributional properties, do not necessarily correspond with those of a literal equivalent, when there is such an equivalent. In this respect, consider one of the arguments that Sadock (1974) uses to distinguish idioms from metaphors.

Recall that, according to Sadock (1974, p. 101), nothing can cooccur with the metaphor which cannot occur with a similar phrase used nonmetaphorically:

- (17) \*He put the red meat on the rug  
by mentioning Castro.
- (18) He spilled the beans by mentioning  
Castro.

The metaphor in (17) cannot cooccur with the additional phrase, although this phrase fits the metaphorical significance as shown by (18). This observation seems to hold

for lexical metaphors, i.e., when it is possible to decompose it and attribute a metaphorical reading for each lexical item. However, this does not work with pragmatic metaphors, when their meaning is the entailment of the whole expression. Consider:

- (19) Lit. \*Pierre pédale dans le yaourt  
 "Pierre is pedaling in yogurt

avec son dernier article.  
 with his last paper."

- (20) Met. Pierre pédale dans le yaourt  
 avec son dernier article.

(Pierre is totally wrong in  
 his last paper.)

- (21) Met. Pierre pédale dans le  
 yaourt { \*volontairement  
           ?aisément  
           malgré lui

In (21), { volontairement  
aisément } can cooccur with the literal reading but not with the metaphorical one; (20) means something like Pierre wrote an absurd paper; avec son dernier article can occur with the metaphor but not with the literal sentence. This shows that selectional restrictions are not always identical for metaphors and their literal equivalents. They are contingent upon the meaning of the expression, not on whether or not they are lexicalized (i.e., have become idioms) or not. The literal interpretation of this type of metaphor is not always compatible with the context. The literal meaning is suppressed, and the interpretation of



the expression is its entailment. Although from a formal point of view, the metaphorical process seems homogeneous in the case of lexical metaphors, and metonymies (but see Section 3), it is totally different in the case of pragmatic metaphors.

Pragmatic metaphors are akin to what is sometimes referred to as a synesthesia in rhetorics, but we can see immediately that there are some important differences. Synesthesias too involve a comparison and therefore are based only on extralinguistic phenomena. However, there is more than a simple comparison involved in the case of pragmatic metaphors. Not only is it impossible to analyze them in terms of features, but this category has very often the effect of modifying the conveyed meaning of the expression from activity toward a state. Consider:

- (22) Marie a avalé son extrait de naissance.  
"Marie swallowed her birth-certificate."  
(Marie is dead.)
- (23) Paul a cassé sa pipe.  
"Paul broke his pipe."  
(Paul is dead.)
- (24) Pierre pédale dans la choucroute.  
"Pierre is pedaling in sauerkraut."  
(Pierre is going nowhere.)
- (25) Paul a rendu l'âme.  
"Paul gave back his soul."  
(Paul is dead.)

These expressions contain a verb denoting an activity, but their meaning denotes a state of affairs.<sup>6</sup>

This process can be explained as a double operation bearing not on the linguistic level, but on what one knows about the world. First, certain stage directions are set, like in (22) where Marie by destroying her birth certificate, brings about a situation equivalent to the negative of her birth. Then, this expression becomes conventionalized and might be uttered in situations which can also be described by its same entailment. Synesthesias are on a purely perceptive level: they are not motivated, as shown by Rimbaud's famous verse:

- (26) A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert,  
       O bleu: voyelles,  
       Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances  
       latentes . . .

Pragmatic metaphors cannot be described as synesthesias; they arise in a specific situation.

All the operations proposed by Sadock (1974), namely substitution, transformation and distribution, to distinguish between idioms and metaphors are not as revealing as he claims, since they do not involve the same level of language. The difference in behavior is not between idioms and metaphors, but between figures of speech whose meaning is limited to each lexical item and those whose meaning is extended beyond each lexical item.

We have tried to shed some light on the different semantic operations involved in the formation of expressions

most likely to become idioms. The purpose of the next section is to show how these different factors are realized grammatically and to relate them to more general phenomena.

### 3. Transformations and References

We have seen in the preceding section that metaphors and idioms which arose from them are the result of a referential operation. We will see in this section whether the different properties, like substitution and transformations, confirm this hypothesis. Sadock (1974), along with Generative semanticists, has claimed that these properties reflect the meaning of idioms.

In light of the facts exposed in Sections 2.1, 2.2, however, we mention that this stance is too schematic and needs to be further clarified. One must distinguish between substitution and transformations since they do not deal with the same level of language. Substitution is a semantic operation in that it bears on the substance of language itself; transformations (movement transformations, deletion) are formal operations. Although they might have some pragmatic import, they bear on what one conveys with language.

The nonapplicability of some operations is not restricted to idioms, but can find its source in more general constraints, either pragmatic or formal. All the

observations made by Fraser (1970) and Quang (1971) can be accounted for in a natural way.

As all previous analyses have pointed out, the application of transformations to phrase idioms does not yield ungrammatical structures, i.e., ill-formed sentences with respect to syntactic conditions on well-formedness, but blocks the idiomatic reading. This fact must be accounted for in our description. To achieve explanatory adequacy, our description must reflect the differences in the output of rules.<sup>7</sup> More precisely, as we have seen above, there are some conditions on the applicability of transformations, which are not necessarily formal. The non-observance of these conditions would not automatically yield ungrammatical structures, but rather some odd or bizarre results. These violations are not perceived by subjects as being grammatically or structurally faulty, but may be corrected to render the interpretation possible. There is a distinct difference between a sentence where a rule of grammar applies in spite of the fact that the structural description is not met, as in (27), and some pragmatic conditions on rules (see (31) and (32) below:

(27)	Harry	worked during the holidays.	
	S	V	ADV.
⇒*PASS:	ADV.	V	by S

The holidays were worked during by Harry.

When the conditions on the application of a rule are pragmatic in nature, something akin to the felicity conditions necessary to decode a speech act happens, in that it is always possible for the speaker to further specify what he meant to convey by supplying additional information. In some instances, at least, degrees of grammaticality are the result of violation of these conditions which are not formal.

Hankamer and Sag (1976) have presented several arguments which show that there are two classes of anaphoric processes, namely deep and surface anaphora. In the case of deep anaphora, the anaphoric relation is determined at a presyntactic level, whereas surface anaphora requires a syntactic antecedent in surface structure. We will concern ourselves with these arguments which are directly relevant to our purpose here, i.e., the explanation of the peculiarities of idioms with respect to transformations.

Surface anaphora, which involves syntactic deletion under identity requires a coherent syntactic antecedent surface structure. This type of anaphora is illustrated by rules of ellipsis: Stripping and Gapping are shown to require syntactic control, even though they may operate across speaker's boundary:

(28) Jill likes peanut butter, but not Peter.

(29) Harry loves Juliet, and Tom, Wendy.

- (30) A: I heard Pamela made an A in  
Dr. Hite's class

B: —by the skin of her teeth

- (31) [Pamela is stepping out of Dr. Hite's  
office with her exam in her hand]

B to A: —By the skin of her teeth.

- (32) [A is tearing apart Miami's  
telephone directory]

B to A: ?\*—And me, Webster's dictionary.

(28) and (29) are illustrations of Stripping and Gapping, respectively. Even though there is enough contextual information to interpret the anaphora in (31) and (32), these examples show that Stripping and Gapping cannot apply without a linguistic antecedent.

The crucial point, however, for our analysis, is that deep anaphora, on the contrary, does not require a linguistic antecedent, but the existence of a coherent semantic entity, as illustrated by the following:

- (33) John believes that the earth is  
larger than it is.

—but Joan doesn't.

—but not Joan.

—and so does Joan.

(33) is ambiguous between a sensible and a stupid reading: the sensible reading is the one where John believes the earth to be a certain size, whereas it is not as large. In

the case of deletion anaphora, the ambiguity is preserved, since the underlying syntactic structure exhibits the ambiguity:

- (34) We expected John to claim that the earth is larger than it is, and he did so.
- (35) Someone told me that the earth is larger than it is, but I can't remember who.

Contrast with the null complement anaphora pronominalization, where do it blocks the sensible reading:

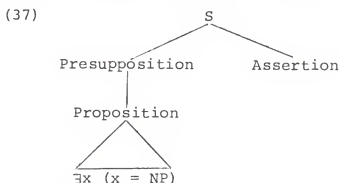
- (36) John believes that the earth is larger than it is,  
       —but Joan doesn't believe it.  
       —and Joan believes it, too.

There is no proposition in (36) that it can represent which is consistent with the sensible reading. The absence of a coherent semantic entity to which it can refer in the case of the sensible reading blocks the sensible meaning.

The same is true of idioms: to apply any transformation which involves reference, like pronominalization, the elements to which the transformation applies must represent a coherent semantic entity in the mind of the participants in a conversation. This will be amended somehow later, when the idiom is part of the linguistic knowledge of the participants. For now, it is sufficient to point out that the loss of reference within an idiom

means that there is no semantic entity whatsoever, either real or imaginary, to which the elements which constitute this idiom can refer to.

Other transformations that idioms undergo with difficulty, if at all, can be shown to involve referential problems. Chu (1976) showed that certain syntactic operations are motivated by underlying presuppositions. Devices used to express these underlying presuppositions include Clefting, Pseudo-Cleft, Relativization, Tough-Movement and Passive, as well as stress. According to his analysis, then, presupposition may be represented underlyingly as an existential proposition of the form  $[\exists x]$  when it involves a statement of existence about  $[x]$ , as in:



This representation accounts for the fact that in (38a), there is an implication that Einstein is alive, which is absent in (38b):

(38a) Einstein visited Princeton.

(38b) Princeton has been visited by Einstein.



In (38a), the underlying presupposition contains a statement of existence about Einstein, which it does not in (38b).

By equating existential presupposition with logic, Chu's analysis neatly accounts for facts about Tough-Movement and Passive:

(39a) The sonata is easy to play  
on this violin [Chu's (12a)].

(39b) This violin is easy to play  
the sonata on [Chu's (12b)].

(39a) says something about the sonata, whereas (39b) puts the emphasis on this violin. Again, here, (39a) the sonata is under the existential proposition, and (39b) this violin is. Consider his illustrations of Passive:

(40a) Every gourmet loves some desserts [Chu's (16a)].

(40b) Some desserts are loved by every  
gourmet [Chu's (16b)].

The semantic differences can be accounted for by the fact that the topicalization of some desserts in (40b) forces the specific interpretation as opposed to the nonspecific interpretation in (40a).

The question of whether transformations change meaning is therefore taken care of if one assumes presupposition as an underlying representation.

We have seen some of the effects that transformations have on the informational content of the sentences. In the upcoming section, some of these traits are tested

against idioms, thus explaining their seemingly erratic behavior.

### 3.1 Application to Idioms

As expanded in 2.1 and 2.2, elements within an idiom have no pragmatic referent. In the sentence:

- (41) L'équipe de football a encore  
remassé une veste.

There is nothing to which veste refers to, or remasser une veste taken literally. We have seen how (Section 2.2) this expression can be used to evoke meaning. This absence of referent may stem from two causes: either idioms originated as pragmatic metaphors, and their elements never had any referent to begin with, or, in the case of lexical metaphors, the referent has been lost. From the arguments presented above, one expects that idioms do not undergo these transformations which are referentially bound, i.e., the transformational problems encountered in idioms are basically the same ones found in metaphors.

Since paraphrases and substitutions bear on the referential aspect of language, they are possible when the idiomatic meaning is still perceived as the result of an inference by the listener, but are ruled out otherwise. As one may expect, in the case of idioms containing archaic lexical items. None of the (b) sentences below can be understood as idioms:

(42a) Alphonse croque le marmot devant  
la porte de Marie.

(42b) \*Alphonse croque le gamin devant  
la porte de Marie.

"Alphonse eats the kid in front of  
Mary's door."

(Alphonse is waiting at Mary's door.)

(43a) Arthur a fait chou blanc.

(43b) \*Arthur a fait légume blanc.

"Arthur did cabbage white."

(Arthur failed.)

(44a) Sidonie bat la campagne.

(44b) \*Sidonie flanque une râclée à la campagne.

"Sidonie is beating the countryside."

(Sidonie is spaced out.)

The underlined lexical items in the (a) sentences are archaic and have lost their original referent. The close synonyms given in the (b) sentences do not denote the same original entity, but the entity that these words came to denote at a later stage of language.

Let us see now whether the evidence presented by Chu (1976) in favor of a deep representation of presupposition is supported by the facts in idioms. Consider first these movement transformations which change the topic, namely Passive, Rel., Cleft and Pseudo-Cleft.

### 3.1.1 Passive.

- (45) \*L'arme à gauche a été passée par Jean.
- (46) \*Sa pipe a été cassée par Paul.
- (47) \*Un lapin a été posé à Marie par Arthur.
- (48) \*?La patte du juge a été graissée par Alphonse.
- (49) \*La tête a été lavée à Jules par Lucien.
- (50) \*Les bâtons ont été mis dans les  
roues de Paul par Pierre.

In (46), Passive is blocked because of a restriction on its application whenever the object is understood as belonging to the subject (Kayne 1975):

- (51) Jean lèvera la main.  
"Jean will raise the (his) hand."
- (52) \* La main sera levée par Jean.  
"The hand will be raised by Jean."

But in all the other examples, although the structural description is met, Passive cannot apply. Again, Chu's analysis predicts this result: in the corresponding active sentences, which are of course grammatical, the surface subject (in topic position) can be represented underlyingly in the existential proposition. Passive, however, has the effect of topicalizing the direct object, thereby asserting its existence. (Problems of doubtful acceptability of sentences like (48) will be dealt with in Section 4.2 of this chapter, along with phenomena of double analyzability.) Contrast again with idioms issued from lexical metaphors:

- (53) Des coupes sombres ont été faites  
dans le budget.
- (54) La poule aux oeufs d'or a été tuée.
- (55) La mère a été vendue par ce salaud.

3.1.2. Pronominalization. As one might expect

from Hankammer and Sag's (1976) arguments, pronominalization is impossible with some idioms:

- (56a) \*Paul a donné le change aux  
"Paul gave the change to the  
flics et Marie l'a donné aussi.  
cops and Marie gave it too."
- (56b) Paul a donné le change aux  
"Paul gave the change to the  
flics et Marie aussi.  
cops and so did Marie."  
  
(Paul fooled the cops and Marie  
did, too.)
- (57a) \*Arthur a passée l'arme à gauche  
"Arthur passed the arm to the left  
et Sidonie l'a passée aussi.  
and Sidonie passed it too."
- (57b) Arthur a passée l'arme à gauche,  
"Arthur passed the arm to the left,  
mais pas Sidonie.  
but not Sidonie."  
  
(Arthur died, but not Sidonie.)

l' in (56a) cannot refer to le change, since it does not refer to a semantic entity, as in (57a) it cannot refer to l'arme à gauche. (56b) and (57b) are acceptable, since the deletion involves the whole idiom. Contrast with:

- (58) Alphonse a pris une cuite monumentale,  
 "Alphonse took a huge drunkenness,  
 et Hector en a pris une aussi.  
 and Hector took one too."
- (59) Frank a vendu la mèche aux flics,  
 "Frank sold the wick to the cops,  
 et Bill l'a vendue à la bande rivale.  
 and Bill sold it to the rival gang."  
 (Frank sold out to the cops, and Bill  
 to the rival gang.)

3.1.3 Relative clause formation. Since relative clauses are used to create a focal position, one expects the same difficulty to arise, i.e., one cannot relativize elements which do not have a referent within idioms:

- (60) \*Paul se souviendra longtemps  
 "Paul will remember for a long time  
 du lapin que Marie lui a posé.  
 the rabbit that Marie gave him."
- (61) \*La patte du juge qu'Alphonse  
 "The paw of the judge that Alphonse  
 a graissée va lui coûter cher.  
 greased will cost him dearly."
- (62) \*L'arme que Paul a passée à gauche  
 a fait pleurer Marie.

Contrast with:

- (63) La cuite que Paul a prise est mémorable.
- (64) La couche que Paul tient fait honte  
 à sa mère.
- (65) La pilule qu' il a avalée a rendu  
 "The pill that he swallowed made  
 Arthur blême de rage.  
 Arthur white with anger."

3.1.4 Assertive stress. It does not appear that one can stress any element within an idiom issued from a pragmatic metaphor) the underlined parts have an assertive stress):

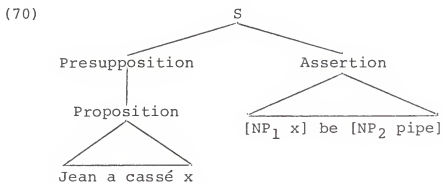
(66) \*Jean a cassé sa pipe.

(67) \*Paul a passé l'arme à gauche.

(68) \*Pierre a mis les bâtons dans les roues de Paul.

(69) \*Alphonse a graissé la patte du juge.

From these examples, it appears that no lexical item within an idiom can be stressed, if this lexical item has no referent. The underlying representation of (66) cannot be, therefore:



Contrast with idioms issued from lexical metaphors:

(71) Paul a mangé le morceau.  
 "Paul ate the piece."  
 (Paul made a confession.)

(72) Le président a fait des coupes sombres  
 "The president made dark cuts  
 dans le budget.  
 in the budget."  
 (The president cut the budget drastically.)

- (73) Ce salaud a vendu la mèche.  
 "This bastard sold the wick."  
 (This bastard gave away a secret.)
- (74) Arthur a pendu la crémaillère  
 "Arthur hung the fireplace-hook  
 samedi dernier.<sup>8</sup>  
 last Saturday."

The underlined lexical items in the preceding sentences can undergo stress: they can be referred to and represented in an underlying existential proposition since they represent, albeit metaphorically or symbolically, a semantic entity.

3.1.5 Clefting. The same contrast is established by this translation:

- (75) \*C'est {un\lapin que Paul a posé  
                   {le}  
           à Marie qui est la cause de sa fureur.
- (76) \*C'est l'arme à gauche que Paul a passée  
       qui a fait pleurer Marie.
- (77) \*C'est l'extrait de naissance que la  
       vieille dame a avalé qui a réjoui  
       ses héritiers.
- (78) C'est la plus belle cuite que Paul  
       ait prise depuis une semaine.
- (79) C'est la couche que Paul tient qui  
       l'a fait nommer président.
- (80) C'est une pilule dure à avaler.

As predicted, then, these transformations which operate on NPs, like the ones above and have the effect of topicalizing these NPs, must operate on elements representing a coherent



semantic or syntactic entity (regardless of whether these NPs must refer to an object in the real world). This analysis explains the exceptions pointed out by Quang (1971) who noticed, in contrast to Fraser's (1970) claim, that Gapping is widely applicable to idioms:

- (81) Thieu has pulled both Nixon's leg  
and Lodge's.
- (82) Thieu can pull Nixon's leg but not  
Sihanouk's.

However, the word leg must be deleted if pull is:

- (83) \*Thieu has pulled both Nixon's leg  
and Lodge's leg.
- (84) \*Thieu can pull Nixon's leg but not  
Sihanouk's leg.

Quang offers no explanation for these facts.

Recall that, from the evidence given above by Hankammer and Sag (1976), Gapping, as an illustration of surface anaphora, requires a coherent syntactic antecedent in surface structure. (83) and (84) suggest that it requires, too, a coherent semantic antecedent: pull one's leg is an idiom of the second type, i.e., derived from what we have termed pragmatic metaphors. The splitting of this idiom over two Ss, without the possibility of attributing a referent to its elements makes (83) and (84) impossible to understand idiomatically.

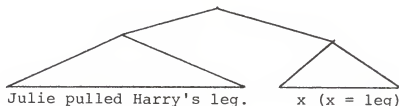
Pull one's leg also undergoes clefting, under certain conditions of stress:

(85) \*It was Harry's leg that Julie pulled.

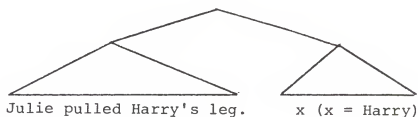
(86) It was Harry's leg that Julie pulled.

When leg is stressed, the sentence is nonidiomatic, but when Harry is, then clefting is acceptable. This can be accounted for by the following underlying representation of (85) and (86) respectively in (87) and (88):

(87) \*



(88)



This type of representation is not entirely satisfactory, however, since in the surface structure of (86) the idiom pull one's leg is split over two Ss. This type of operation should not be possible (cf. (69)). We will propose an explanation for this below. Quang (1971) is quite correct, in our view, in his comment that sometimes the meaning of an idiom is "distributed over the morphemes which comprise it." Evidence for this fact, as well as tests for this proposal, will be presented in Section 4.2.

Let us turn now to some of the problems which our analysis may encounter.

There are cases of pronominalization within idioms which seem to constitute counterexamples to our claim. Since the anaphoric process involved is a case of deep anaphora, which requires an antecedent representing a coherent semantic entity, and since we have seen that these referents are absent pragmatically, how is it possible?

Consider:

- (89a) She's a bitch/on wheels.
- (89b) She's got four wheels.
- (89c) She's an eighteen-wheeler.
- (90a) Paul a graissé la patte du juge.
- (90b) La patte de ce juge est si  
           "The paw of this judge is so  
           graisseuse que je l'évite.  
           greasy that I avoid him."  
           (This judge is so corrupt that  
           I avoid him.)
- (91a) Arthur se serre la ceinture.  
           "Arthur tightens the (his) belt."
- (91b) La ceinture d'Arthur  
           "The belt of Arthur  
           n'a plus qu'un cran.  
           has only one hole left."

All these sentences show that some type of anaphora is possible in some idioms issued from pragmatic metaphors, an operation which should be impossible. A possible explanation is that reference to parts of idioms does not have the

same characteristics as other types of reference. It is not a case of linguistic reference since there does not need to be any mention of the word referred to in the discourse, and it is not a case of pragmatic reference since there is no coherent semantic entity to which the element can refer.

In this instance, anaphora do not operate either on linguistic level or on what one knows about the world, but on what one knows about language. These anaphoric processes operate on the knowledge of a given structure of language, i.e., a given idiom and for the idiomatic reference to be understood, the listener must know the idiom.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence of this, pronominalization, as well as other anaphoric phenomena within idioms cannot be treated as a unified phenomenon. It is worth noting that this type of anaphora produces a low sort of humor, like all plays on words. In any case, all topicalization operations are much better when the element topicalized is specified as being part of knowledge of language. This is conventionally accomplished with the use of adjectives like proverbial, ol' in English, or sacré, fameux in French:

(92) It's the ol' beans that John spilled.

(93) C'est la fameuse arme que Pierre  
"It's the famous arm that Pierre

a passé à gauche.  
passed to the left."

#### 4. Conventional Implicature

Although the analysis proposed so far goes a long way toward explaining the behavior of idioms, there are yet facts which seem to contradict it: some idioms which belong to one category display traits which are characteristic of the other. Furthermore, there are striking similarities between idioms issued from metaphors and idiomatic sentences as defined by Searle (1975); for instance, these speech acts cannot undergo substitution without losing their illocutionary force:

(94) Can you pass the salt?

(95) Is it the case that at present you  
are able to pass the salt"

Whereas (94) uttered at a dinner table is a request for the salt, the paraphrase (95) cannot be in good faith considered as the same request, although the sentential meaning is roughly the same. For (94) to be understood as a request to pass the salt a number of conditions, as we have seen, involving stage directions and the willingness of participants in the conversation. One of these conditions is that the hearer must be able to carry out the action, i.e., the action should take place in the very near future.

Strong evidence in favor of conversational implicature is the fact that when one uses a sentence like (94) in the past, it is impossible to get the request reading:

## (6) Could you pass the salt yesterday?

This sentence can mean only that one is enquiring about someone's ability to perform a certain action, for example, in the case of the victim of a stroke who is being re-educated by a physical therapist who is checking on his or her progress. The request sense of the utterance is blocked because it violates one condition for the speech act to be carried out satisfactorily, namely that the addressee be able to perform the act requested of him.

The possibility of decoding (94) as a request is conditioned on the recoverability of the original meaning of the expression: the listener must be able to make the inference from (94) to (96) given all the conditions stated by Grice (1975), as cooperative principles. Although the principle of conversational implicature cannot explain idioms, because the relationship between literal and derived meaning is lost in most cases, it certainly plays a very important role in the formation of idioms.

We have seen that, in the case of pragmatic metaphor, the idiomatic meaning is arrived at by the chain of inference that both speaker and listener can establish between the literal meaning and the most likely implicature. Conversational implicature plays an important role in communication processes, as it allows all sorts of nuances from speakers, like hinting, politeness, irony

and so forth. From a synchronic point of view, it seems that it has little effect on the surface distribution of morphemes in a sentence. From a diachronic point of view, however, conversational implicature is crucial in the formation of expressions which came to mean something different from their literal meaning. Just as in synchrony, one cannot distinguish from a purely formal treatment between different figures of speech, like metonymies and metaphors, these figures in diachrony play an important role in the formation of new words, i.e., they have an effect on the shape of language.<sup>10</sup> We must, then, explain these facts in a general and natural way.

All the facts presented so far suggest that there is a general tendency for language to incorporate speakers' experience of the world. This tendency is reflected not only in referential operations which correspond to a need for naming entities or describing situations, but also on the syntactic level. Questions can be used as requests and these devices exhibit some of their formal properties.

As idioms such a tendency can be described only as a general principle by which a conveyed meaning becomes the primary reading of an utterance. It should be stated outside grammar, since it operates on two different levels of language: the cognitive or perceptive level and the

syntactic level. There would be no way of incorporating within grammar such a principle as needed here since it covers a wide spectrum of phenomena in a simple and natural way. This principle has already been implicit in some analyses of speech acts, and its importance in semantics recognized by Grice (1975) and Searle (1975). We give here some additional evidence, in an attempt to state the principle more precisely, giving some conditions for its operation and by showing its effect on language.

#### 4.1 Evidence for Conventional Implicature

P. Cole (1975) has given a strong argument in favor of the impact of conversational implicature in the historical derivation of sentences which have a different meaning from that which one would expect from their surface structure. Consider the following:

- (97) Let's have our medicine now, it  
doesn't taste bad at all.
- (98) Now let's all think before we raise  
our hands.
- (99) Listen, Sam. Let's get that work  
out before we lose the client, { will you?  
  } why don't you?

All these examples show cases where the speaker, although he uses the form let's whose logical structure is something like I propose that we, has no intention of engaging in the activity he suggests: (97) may be uttered by a nurse to



children, (95) by a school teacher, and (99) by a boss to his employee. The logical structure of let's in the examples above is more like I propose that you. This is reflected by the fact that (100) is ungrammatical:

- (100) I propose that we finish  
           the job before it rains, { \*will you?  
   { \*why don't you?

That the logical structure of nonliteral let's contains a second person subject is demonstrated by the fact that the intensive own can be used in imperatives only with a second person possessive:

- (101) \*Use my own car.

Use your own car.

This is paralleled by constructions involving nonliteral let's:

- (102) \*Let's wash my own hands.

Let's wash your own hands.

That the nonliteral let's doesn't mean mean I propose that we is reflected in its distributional properties:

- (103a) Let's us go to the movies.

- (103b) \*Let us us go to the movies.

It seems that speakers assume that the conveyed meaning is the literal one, unless there is syntactic evidence to the contrary. It is plausible that because of the frequent association of a given implicature with an expression, this expression would ultimately lose some of its original

distributional properties, as in (103a). (97), (98), and (99) convey the meaning of an imperative sentence because the speaker is felt by the listener to be condescending, since he proposes a course of action in which he has no intention of participating in, although he hints at it.

The evidence from idioms points toward the same phenomenon: here, too, we have a historical process by which a conventionally associated meaning becomes the only meaning available to speakers, thereby showing some of the formal reflexes of the entailment.

This seems to be a universal phenomenon, even if it does not manifest itself exactly in the same fashion from language to language. It can account for word formation, thereby explaining semantic shifts from original meaning to contemporary meaning in etymology. This fact is important because it leads to the same conclusion reached by some linguists (Fraser 1970), namely that all lexical items are a case of idioms.

Two other commonly accepted characteristics of idioms are also accounted for in a natural way, i.e., arbitrariness and ambiguity. These two characteristics thus become irrelevant to the very nature of idioms, since they are the consequence of the loss or preservation of original forms. Therefore, they cannot be of any use to predict the idiomatic status of an expression.

Conventional implicature, then, can be defined as the uniqueness of entailment: to one utterance can correspond one and only one entailment, regardless of context (excluding self-entailment, to avoid the literal meaning to be decoded). It belongs to the class of noncancelable presuppositions. The absence of reference within idioms cannot change the conveyed meaning.

The conventionalization of implicature constitutes a case where knowledge of the world has become part of the knowledge of the language. We have seen that in idioms issued from pragmatic metaphors, the tense is very often restricted. This is a good indication that there is a phenomenon of implicature: if the meaning of an idiom is the result of an entailment, modifying the tense may modify the entailment, therefore it may result in a loss of idiomaticity:

- (104) \*Est-ce que Pierre a sucé  
       "Did Pierre suck the  
       les pissenlits par la racine?  
       dandelions by the root?"

As seen earlier (Section 3.1) the meaning of this idiom denotes an ongoing action or situation. (104) is clearly nonidiomatic because the "passé composé" in French is used to indicate that an event took place in the past, at a certain time, and is now over. Therefore (104) cannot carry

the entailment that Pierre is dead because one is not usually dead one day and alive the next. This is parallel to (96) above.

The implicature conventionally established by usage of speakers, then, must meet certain conditions to hold: it may be suspended by operations like substitution, or even tense changes. The same operation applied to both speech act idioms and phrase idioms brings about the same results, which is a good indication that the same principle is at work.

In the next section, the import of conventional implicature on language change will be illustrated, and some of the reasons why some expressions are most likely to become idioms will be given.

Conventionalization of implicature seems to be widespread, if not universal: all languages have ways of requesting things without putting these requests bluntly. The parallel between (94) and (95) holds for several other languages in the same fashion:

(105a) ¿Puede pasar la sal, por favor?

(105b) ¿Tiene { la habilidad } de pasar  
          { el poder }  
          la sal, \*por favor?

(106a) Kannst du mir bitte das Salz reichen?

(106b) Bist du in der Lage mir das Salz  
          zu reichen, \*bitte?

(107a) Peux-tu me passer le sel, s'il te plait?

(107b) Es-tu capable de me passer le sel,  
\*s'il te plait?

Only the (a) sentences above can be used to conventionally utter a request. The paraphrases in (b) cannot, as witness their impossibility to occur with por favor, bitte, s'il te plait.<sup>11</sup> One argument in favor of conventional implicature is that the (b) sentences can fit in the principles exposed by Grice (1975) and Searle (1975), just as the (a) sentences but cannot be used to request the salt: the ten steps (Searle 1975) in the conversation apply to both (a) and (b) sentences.<sup>12</sup> The (a) sentences have become established as idiomatic forms to convey a request. Searle's (1975) explanation is not entirely satisfactory: he proposes to add a maxim of conversation to Grice's (1975) which would require one to speak idiomatically unless there is some special reason not to. It is not clear, however, what he means: if an utterance is idiomatic, it has become so because of the conventionalization of its implicature, presumably through repeated use over a certain period of time. But further on Searle (1975) claims that "in order to be a plausible candidate for an utterance as an indirect speech act, a sentence has to be idiomatic to start with" (Searle 1975:77). If a speech act is conventionalized, i.e., idiomatic, how can it be "idiomatic to start with" to become a speech act? It appears that

utterances tend to become conventionalized, in the case of speech acts, when they are relatively simple and neutral as far as their entailment is concerned: the (b) sentences above regard exclusively the physical ability of the hearer to perform an act.

We will turn now to the effect that the principle of conventional implicature has on language.

#### 4.2 Conventional Implicature and Fossilization

In a paper entitled "fossilization in French Syntax," Casagrande (1975) distinguishes between two types of fossils: derivational and diachronic fossils. Fossilization causes the freezing up of some otherwise viable items which thus become restricted in the possibility of undergoing certain rules. This phenomenon has been referred to as frozenness (Fraser 1970). We will outline some of Casagrande's arguments below and show that idioms constitute a case of diachronic fossilization, triggered by the principle of conventional implicature. This fossilization is not restricted to metaphors and other referential operations, but can be found too in sentences which are conventionally used to convey a meaning different from their literal one. The facts uncovered by Casagrande (1975) show that fossils found their origin in the conventionalization of their conveyed meaning, whether they were phrase idioms of speech act idioms. This supports the need for the principle

outlined above. We will give only a few examples to illustrate this point:

- (108a) Voici l'homme.
- (108b) Voilà que Georges s'amuse enfin.
- (108c) L'homme que voilà est coupable.
- (108d) Voilà.

Voici/voilà have some characteristics of verbs: it can take objects, sentence complementation, subject NPs and its object may be deleted as shown respectively in (108a) through (108d). It is frozen, however, in the sense that it lost other characteristics of verbs:

- (109a) \*Voici-le.
- (109b) \*Ne voilà pas Georges.
- (109c) \*Voyez - ci, messieurs les députés,  
notre programme de gouvernement.
- (110a) Ves moi chi.
- (110b) \*Ves chi moi.
- (110c) Voyez-cy le contract.

In contrast with old French (110a), clitics cannot occur in postverbal position, which is the normal order for imperatives: (110a). Voilà cannot take negation (109b),<sup>13</sup> neither can it agree (109c), whereas it could in old French.

Another case of diachronic fossilization is illustrated by the French expression est-ce-que which is used as a yes/no question marker in French. As pointed out by

Casagrande (1975), it cannot be derived from the declarative order of the expression: the normal answer to (111) is (112), not (113):

(111) Est-ce que Geneviève est enceinte?

(112) Oui, elle l'est.

(113) C'est qu'elle est enceinte.

There are arguments for both a derivational treatment of est-ce-que and an interpretive account, but no deciding factor for choosing one or the other. This is the same type of dilemma we have encountered in Chapter III.

Casagrande (1975) assumes fossilization to get out of this dilemma, so that otherwise freely applicable rules will be blocked. Although all the evidence presented is undisputable, fossilization must be defined as the result of application of a more general principle to account for the similarities between idioms and speech act idioms.

Conventionalization of implicature takes place when an expression is used repeatedly over a long period of time. Not suprisingly, it reflects the preoccupations of speakers throughout history: all expressions which have undergone this principle have in common the characteristic that they deal with human subjects. Again, this is common to speech act idioms and phrase idioms: recall the sentence (51) in Chapter III (repeated here as (114):

(114) Why paint your house purple?



(114) always has the meaning of (115):

(115) You should not paint your house  
purple.

as a consequence of a You + Tense + Deletion rule. The meaning (115) of (114) is arrived at only if you is deleted, i.e., a [+human] subject. This is again reflected by the fact that why not requires a voluntary verb:

(116) \*Why not resemble your grandmother?

As far as phrase idioms are concerned, we have not found any which did not require a [+human] subject, even though they sometimes can be used metaphorically.

(117) Arthur file un mauvais coton.  
"Arthur is weaving a bad cotton."  
(Arthur is going to be in trouble.)

(118) Cette entreprise file un mauvais coton.  
"This business is weaving a bad cotton."

In (118), entreprise can be the subject of the idiom if it is understood as a nonphysical person which is ailing. This is evident again if we consider the expressions from earlier stages of language, which have disappeared since: they all reflect human preoccupations, as they deal with death, sanity, bodily functions, religion, exchange, physical or psychological defects.

Casagrande (1975) mentions the existing relationship between borrowing and fossilization, and claims that fossilized items cannot be borrowed usually. It is very common for complex expressions to be borrowed language

internally, i.e., from one dialect to another. When this occurs, it is most likely that one expression will be borrowed with only one possible implicature; consider:

- (119) L'escroc a donné le change à la vieille dame.  
(The crook fooled the old lady.)

Donner le change was borrowed from a hunter's dialect, and was originally used to mean that an animal had managed to lead pursuing dogs on a wrong track. What is interesting here is that the hunter's dialect has a whole paradigm still in use, but only one expression was borrowed:

- (120) tourner au change  
prendre le change  
empanner le change  
(to be fooled)

The conventionally associated meaning applies only to (119) and not to any of (120)} as movement transformations which can still apply to the literal expressions are less than grammatical with the idiom.

We have seen that in some cases involving idioms issued from pragmatic metaphors, certain formal operations on the elements constituting the idiom are possible. This seems to constitute a counterexample to our analysis: once an idiom is formed, the lexical items which constitute it lose their reference; transformations like Relat., Passive, Cleft, or Pro. which must operate on referring NPs do apply to some of these idioms, and this is inconsistent with our analysis. There is, however, a natural explanation to

solve this apparent paradox: speakers assume that the conveyed meaning which is always associated with an utterance, i.e., its conventional implicature, is in fact its literal meaning. They distribute parts of the meaning of the idiom to parts of the idiom. There is indisputable historical evidence for this behavior. Consider:

- (121) Alphonse n'a connu que  
 "Alphonse has known nothing but  
 (Alphonse had a very unhappy  
 plaies et bosses dans son enfance.  
 bruises and bumps in his childhood."  
 childhood.)
- (122) Arsène se met sur son  
 "Arsene puts himself on his  
 (Arsene dresses up to go to  
 trente-et-un pour aller chez la comtesse.  
 thirty-one to go to the Contessa's."  
 the Contessa's.)
- (123) Georges est tombé dans les pommes  
 "George fell into the apples  
 (George fainted at  
 à la vue de ce spectacle.  
 at this sight."  
 this sight.)

The sentences above contain lexical items which have been reanalyzed: the original items, plaids (= trial) in (121), trentain (= cloth) in (122) and pâmes (= faint) in (123) are attested in earlier texts, but have subsequently disappeared from everyday language, and remained exclusively in these expressions (cf. Chapter II). Since these lexical items no longer denoted anything, they were reanalyzed

respectively as plaies (bruises), trente-et-un (thirty-one), and pommes (apples). Whereas there is no problem of decoding in (121) and (123), (122) gives further support to our claim. When a native speaker of French is asked to explain (122), no mention is made of the fact that the sentence is ungrammatical, but all the glosses proposed attribute a referent to trente-et-un. One speaker associated it with the size of shoes, the other with the thirty-first of the month, connected with payday, therefore shopping for clothes, etc.

Once conventionalization of implicature has applied, reference to lexical items within idioms becomes very difficult. Topicalization is usually related to new information, which is expected by speakers to refer to some semantically coherent object. This is exemplified by some idioms which can occur either with a definite or indefinite article, as in:

- (124) Edouard a mis {les} bâtons  
                               {des}  
       "Edward put {the} sticks  
                               {Ø}  
       (Edward prevented Robert  
           dans les roues de Robert.  
           in the wheels of Robert."  
           from doing something.)

Although (124) may passivize under certain circumstances, i.e., when bâtons is meant as something like obstacles,

there is a difference between (125) and (126) in terms of acceptability:

(125) \*Les bâtons lui ont été mis dans les roues.

(126) Des bâtons lui ont été mis dans les roues.

The use of the definite article les in (125), usually associated with old information, therefore less worth of topic, makes the item less susceptible of being the focus.

Because reference is lost in some cases, the distinction between idioms issued from lexical metaphors on the one hand and idioms issued from pragmatic metaphors on the other tend to become hazy: idioms of the first type may reflect some of the characteristics of the other and vice-versa.

### 5. Consequences for the Theory

A consequence of the diachronic process of idiomatization is that because of the tendency to attribute referents by native speakers to parts of idioms, a given expression may be analyzed differently by native speakers, and a given speaker can analyze one idiom in two different ways. One such instance of double analyzability has been pointed out by G. Lakoff (1977) in English, the idiom "keep tabs on" may be seen as a V or as a verb + Noun. These two possibilities are reflected in the transformations which this idiom can undergo, respectively in (127) and (128):

(127) Harry's activities will be kept  
tabs on.

(128) Tabs will be kept on Harry's ac-  
tivities.

In (127), keep tabs on is analyzed as a verb, and Harry is the underlying object moved into subject position by Pass. In (128), on the other hand, tabs means something like records, i.e., is assigned a referent, and acts as an underlying object of keep, whereas Harry is the indirect object of keep. Not only is this consistent with our analysis presented in Sections 3, 3.1 above, but it follows from it directly: (128) would be unacceptable if tabs was semantically empty. Such examples abound in French:

(129) Arthur a pendu la crémaillère  
samedi dernier.

(130) La crémaillère sera pendu le 13  
en dépit du retard des travaux.

(131) La crémaillère a été joyeuse.

(132) Paul s'est fait donner le change  
par Arthur.

(133) Le change a été donné à Paul  
par Arthur.

It is conceivable that (132) above would not be acceptable for some speakers. The argument presented above constitutes a very strong case against Generative Semantics assumption that one nonambiguous sentence can have only one possible semantic deep structure, since the meaning of idioms can be arrived at by two different analyses.

Another even more fundamental problem seems to be incompatible with the very nature of Generative theory: there cannot be a finite number of operations to describe metaphorical processes.

It is therefore impossible to give a Generative description of what such rules would look like which could generate these compounds or expressions. Furthermore, the fact that speakers may refer to elements within an idiom without this element denoting an object in a real or fantasy world suggests that they are learned as a whole, as bound phrases. Children do not use idioms in their speech, and presumably cannot play with reference.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, a synchronic description must allow for sentences which are not generated but learned as a whole with a meaning of their own. Allowing the derivation of idioms would render the model so powerful that it would lose any explanatory value. This is why idioms have been relegated so often as units in the lexicon. We have seen, however, that whatever constraints may apply can be independently motivated without having recourse to some ad hoc features. This, of course, raises immediately the question of what should be in the lexicon, or what it should look like. We have no answer to this question at this point, except for the observation that maybe lexical items should not be stored in the lexicon along with some more

or less arbitrary features, but could be defined according to an optimum context of occurrence. But again, what shape this context would take and what the ultimate consequences for the theory would be is beyond the scope of this study.

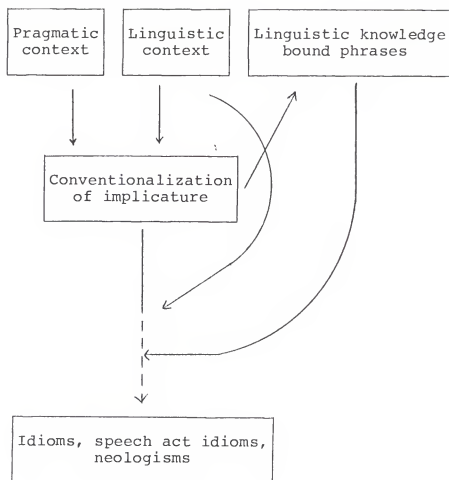
## 6. Conclusion

We have seen that idioms contribute the realization in synchrony of a double operation: first, a referential operation which is triggered by the need for naming and describing certain situations; second, a general principle of semantics by which certain communication procedures become conventionalized. This principle leads to the lexicalization of the implicature of expression and to a reanalysis by speakers who generally assume that the conveyed meaning of an expression is its literal one. Thus, speakers redistribute the conveyed meaning over the structure of the expression.

This conventionalization of implicature coupled with reanalysis can account for the double analyzability of certain idioms, idiom variance, and different intuitive judgment from speakers with respect to the acceptability of idioms which have undergone operations such as substitution, anaphora and movement transformations. This complex interaction of linguistic and nonlinguistic phenomena can be represented as:



(134)



Idioms, speech-act idioms and neologisms evolve from the conventionalization of the implicature of expressions in a certain context, pragmatic or linguistic. As a result of this conventionalization, speakers learn a certain amount of bound phrases, which in turn may influence the surface form of idioms, through reanalysis, and allowing them to undergo certain operations like transformation and substitutions.

# Notes to Chapter IV

<sup>1</sup>See Grice's (1975) example of sing.

<sup>2</sup>Pragmatic aspects of utterances have usually been ignored by early Generative Semanticists in their descriptions, since these aspects were felt to be irrelevant to the derivation of sentences.

<sup>3</sup>Fauconnier (1974b) has shown that pragmatic factors can block the applications of Passive in an imbedded sentence.

<sup>4</sup>See Borkin (1972).

<sup>5</sup>See Reddy (1969) for a different approach to metaphor.

<sup>6</sup>This fact was pointed out by Quang (1971). Some idioms have stative meaning, but their literal counterpart has a non-stative verb. Judgments in this respect, however, vary greatly from speakers to speakers: this might come from the fact that a given expression is perceived as having different entailments. If this suggestion can be verified, it would constitute a strong argument in favor of our analysis.

<sup>7</sup>The question on whether transformations change meaning has been widely debated. It does not seem, however, that it is the issue at hand.

<sup>8</sup>See Section 4 for an account of the ambivalent nature of examples like (74).

<sup>9</sup>Further evidence in favor of this type of anaphora can be found in the fact that examples like (90b) are not acceptable when patte (paw) is substituted for main (hand), although they mean the same to speakers (patte being slangish).

(i) ??La main de ce juge est si  
graisseuse que je l'évite.

<sup>10</sup>For instance, numerous words in French are no longer felt to be metaphors or metonymies by speakers:

(i) un frigidaire  
(a refrigerator [name brand])

- (ii) une mobylette  
(a moped [brand name])
- (iii) la queue  
(the waiting line [the tail])

<sup>11</sup>All languages do not have the same speech-act idioms, however. Searle (1975) has pointed out that the sentence equivalent to (105a) in Czech,

- (i) Můžete mi podat tu knížku?

is odd when uttered as a request.

<sup>12</sup>See Searle (1975, p. 73).

<sup>13</sup>Voilà can take negation in popular French:

- (i) Voilà-t-il pas qu'il est arrivé  
à l'heure.

But this occurs only with clitic insertion.

<sup>14</sup>Actually, children learn some speech-act idioms fairly early, like please, thank you, etc. It would be interesting to see if our suggestion that children learn phrase idioms late is supported by a psycholinguistic inquiry.

## CHAPTER V CONCLUSIONS

### 1. Summary of Findings

We have seen in this study that the class traditionally referred to as idioms is the result of a double operation.

The first involves operations on the referential aspect of language and is exemplified by figures of speech such as metaphors. This process involves what speakers know about the world and how they express it by linguistic means.

Another figure of speech was defined as pragmatic metaphor. Unlike lexical metaphors, which can be accounted for within a componential semantics theory, pragmatic metaphors arise in a specific situation and their meaning cannot be distributed over the elements of a given expression, but is the implicature of the expression, i.e., its meaning is arrived at through what one knows about the world and the situation in which these pragmatic metaphors are uttered. In this case, an analysis in terms of features is inadequate. The reluctance of idioms to transformations observed by grammarians were shown to stem from the absence of referent of parts of idioms: when part of an idiom

is specified as part of the structural change of a transformation, it must refer to either a linguistic or a semantic entity. These metaphorical processes are a synchronic phenomenon. There cannot be a derivational explanation for such figures of speech, because there is not a reasonably limited number of formal operations, like deletion, to account for them. Furthermore, such deletion would eliminate semantic material crucial for their understanding.

The second aspect of idiomaticity consists in a process by which the conveyed meaning of an expression becomes conventionalized. It constitutes the reflection on language of human experience, as speakers take the implicature for the literal meaning of the sentence.

The notion of conventional implicature was shown to have some important consequences. Since speakers assume that the conveyed meaning is the primary meaning, they tend to reanalyze idioms and attribute to some of their elements referents to fit their understanding. As a consequence of this, some idioms can be analyzed from two different viewpoints. This fact conflicts with the general assumption of Generative Semantics that to one nonambiguous sentence corresponds only one possible semantic deep structure.

Another consequence is that conventionalization of implicature allows speakers to refer to parts of idioms,

although these parts have no pragmatic nonlinguistic referents. This is possible because idioms are learned as bound phrases: in order for such anaphora to be possible, both speaker and listener must know the idiom.

This principle of conventional implicature was shown to operate not only on figures of speech, but on what Sadock (1972) called speech-act idioms. Although a cross-linguistic comparison is not always valid, it was suggested that all languages make use of such a principle in the formation of new words, clichés and so forth.

## 2. Remarks

The findings of this study bring up several key issues for linguistic theory.

Generative theory is not equipped to handle idioms satisfactorily. The derivation of idioms is not possible within a transformational grammar, since they are the result of two combined operations. There cannot be a purely derivational account of idiom because it is impossible to incorporate both the diachronic and synchronic aspect of language in the linguistic description.

A derivational explanation could conceivably be possible if all idioms were totally lexicalized, i.e., had all the properties of their meaning in terms of distribution and other formal operations, and none of their literal counterpart. However, we have seen that it is not the case.

The usual alternative in Generative theory is, of course, to store them in the lexicon. This would mean that the shape of the lexicon would be considerably different from what it has been assumed by the grammarians (Sullivan 1977). Yet the theory has to provide for the fact that whole sentences are learned, as witnessed by referential operations possible with these sentences, and by the fact that these sentences may become fossils.

## APPENDIX

### Idioms Containing Archaisms

n'être pas dans son assiette  
battre la campagne  
battre la chamade  
donner le change  
faire chou blanc  
croquer le marmot  
n'avoir que dalle  
faire des épates  
n'avoir pas un fifrelin  
tout de go  
tomber dans le lac  
à l'article de la mort  
être en nage  
tirer les vers du nez  
chercher des noises  
avoir maille à partir avec (X)  
peu ou prou  
de pied en cap  
casser sa pipe  
plaies et bosses



prendre la poudre d'escampette  
 se fouler la rate  
 à tort et à travers  
 se mettre sur son trente-et-un

Ill-formed Idioms

1

battre la campagne  
 battre en brèche  
 tourner casaque  
 faire chou blanc  
 mettre au clou  
 être sous la coupe de (X)  
 croquer le marmot  
 une grosse légume  
 à l'article de la mort  
 être en nage  
 avoir maille à partir avec (X)  
 de quoi (X) retourne

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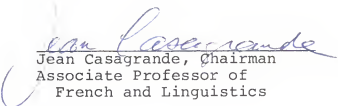
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#### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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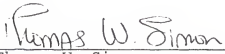
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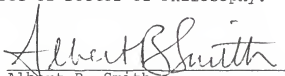
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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Albert B. Smith". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Albert B. Smith  
Professor of Romance  
Languages

This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Program in Linguistics in the College of Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate Council, and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Dean, Graduate School